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Back to the Future: Imaginaries of Africa on East Asian Screens

SPECIAL COLLECTION: THE ASIAN-AFRICAN FILM CONNECTION

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The Africa we see on Japanese and Chinese screens generally bears little relation to the geographic region and its socio-political and historical concerns. Yet since the popular Tarzan films that swept the 1920s Japanese box office, an imagined Africa has played a significant role in film texts that explore East Asian identities and their implications for global futures in the context of natural and man-made disaster. From narrative blockbusters such as Japan's *Tarzan* to indie horror films such as *World Apartment Horror*, African bodies and places reflect forms of collectivity imagined as lost, past, or missing, as well as the unresolved issues that this loss may produce. In documentaries like *Ryūichi Sakamoto: Coda*, these pasts also present potential solutions for the impending disasters of the Anthropocene. In contemporary Chinese cinema, Africa also embodies both a 'lost past' and a potential future. In films such as *Wolf Warrior II*, an imagined African locale presents both threats and promises in a climate of tense geopolitical and biopolitical change where China, rather than 'the West', will provide solutions. The tropes utilised in this film borrow from stereotypical African-inspired imagery in their depiction of violent hordes of sick and starving people unimpeded by the rule of law, yet the bodies of idealised young Africans also represent new possibilities to come. In this way, a stereotyped Africa figures in East Asian cinema as a reflexive temporal fold for imagining both lost pasts and uncertain futures.

Note: Romanised Japanese film titles have been marked JPN and Chinese film titles CHN.

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INTRODUCTION: IMAGINING AFRICA FROM EAST ASIA

The Africa that we see on Japanese and Chinese screens often bears little relation to the geographic region and the lived experiences of its inhabitants.[1] Nonetheless, an imagined Africa plays a significant role in some contemporary films that explore possible global futures and East Asia's role therein. These futures are often imagined in the context of natural or man-made disaster. From blockbusters such as the *Wolf Warrior* franchise (*Wolf Warrior*/CHN: *Zhàn lán*, Wu Jing, 2015; *Wolf Warrior II*/CHN: *Zhàn lán 2*, Wu Jing, 2017) to genre movies like *World Apartment Horror* (JPN: *Wārudo apātomento horā*, Ōtomo Katsuhiro, 1991), and even independent documentaries like *Ryūichi Sakamoto: Coda* (Steven Nomura Schible, 2017), Africa is imagined by certain Chinese and Japanese creatives as home to a collective society of the kind valued in a certain modernist reframing of neo-Confucian ideologies, living in harmony with nature. When the ideological mood turns to assessing East Asia's own collectivity as lost, past, or missing, in the context of removal from or disharmony with the natural world, this imagined Africa is re-invoked as ideal.

Yet the Africa of contemporary East Asian cinema is also imagined as home to violence, corruption, poverty, and dark forces manifesting as demons, zombies, and otherworldly creatures, as in the films discussed below. As our analysis of these few East Asian film texts which specifically engage with African countries and characters will show, an imagined beautiful, traditional Africa in harmony with the natural world is narratively positioned as the solution to these same evils, as African characters draw from knowledge of nature and folklore to help East Asian protagonists. Running counter to stereotypes that identify African characters' bodies with disease, poverty, and zombie-like states, an emerging narrative trope locates curative properties within the African body itself.

While zombie stereotypes and imagery continue in Chinese and Japanese films featuring African characters and settings, African characters' bodies are also becoming the physical site from which a cure is either forcibly extracted, or willingly produced. This trope is reminiscent of Thomas P. Elsaesser's observations on the *pharmakon* motif common to mind-game films. Following Derrida, Elsaesser defines the *pharmakon* motif as 'poison-as-cure, cure-as-poison' (Elsaesser 2018: 19). This short article posits the allegorical use of an imagined Africa in recent Japanese and Chinese cinema as *pharmakon*, both problem and solution, danger and salvation, sickness and cure. Understanding this imagined Africa as *pharmakon* suggests that we might see these films as related to the mind-game film. While we are not arguing for an understanding of these films as mind-game films in themselves, we take Elsaesser's basic definition of mind-game films as thought experiments, or what-ifs, and ask ourselves: What are the what-ifs being thought through in these films, and what are the implications of the Africa-East Asia relationship presented therein?

As Deanna T. Nardy has argued, an 'imaginary Africa' in Japanese visual culture is often presented as 'necessary to Japanese identity construction' (Nardy 2021). In the Japanese and Chinese films analysed here, stereotypical qualities of an imagined Africa are used to test and extend the abilities of Japanese and Chinese protagonists, contributing to a construction of these East Asian identities as alternately dominant and threatened. Worst-case narrative outcomes borrow from stereotypical African inspired-imagery in the depiction of violent hordes of sick and starving people, while a solution is often presented as inspired by an imagined Africa in touch with nature and respectful of familial structures. In this way, an imagined Africa figures in East Asian cinema as a reflexive device for envisaging both positive and negative futures, and the role of East Asian protagonists within a globalized future world. We will consider the implications of such imageries in Jamaican cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter's work on the overrepresentation of Man, ultimately putting into question the legitimacy of filmic projects that seek to substitute one hegemonic ethnoclass for another.

SEARCHING FOR AFRICA IN EAST ASIAN CINEMA

In the early stages of planning this article, we struggled to find significant representation of the nations of the African continent in Chinese and Japanese cinema. More challenging still was the search for fully realised African characters. American films screened in Japan, such as *Africa Speaks!* (Walter Futter, 1931, shown in Japan in 1931) and *Trader Horn* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1931) often featured 'African' characters portrayed by African-American actors. In Japanese and Chinese films, black characters also tended to be played by African-American actors, such as Arthur 'Chico' Lourant (also known as Chico Roland) in Japan. Our collaborative search eventually produced three relatively recent film texts featuring Africa and African characters, but the following article should not be taken as evidence of a fully developed engagement with Africa in Chinese and Japanese cinema today.

The examples analysed below are exceptional rather than representative, but they do suggest some echoes across Chinese and Japanese cinematic imaginaries of Africa over the last thirty years. It should be noted that the African characters represented in these texts are always black, rarely identified with a particular country, and often portrayed by black actors of other nationalities. Studies of the representation of blackness in Japanese cinema, literature, and media cultures have noted a

focus on African American characters and actors, rather than African (for example Cornyetz 1994; Russell 1991, 1998), whereas the Chinese context often conflates the two through problematic racial imaginaries (Coleman 2009). This careless approach suggests the function that many African characters take in East Asian film narratives, playing minor roles designed to add humour or local colour, as in the films discussed below.

As Petrus Liu has argued, the African characters of many contemporary Chinese cinema texts are not developed, three-dimensional beings (2018), but rather ciphers through which we learn more about Chinese protagonists. Our analysis of *Wolf Warrior II* considers the impact of the film's setting in an unnamed part of the African continent, and the minor characterization of a young African girl who embodies the cure for a virus afflicting both the African characters and the Chinese protagonist. Subsequent analysis of the representation of an African character in the Japanese film adaptation of the graphic novel *World Apartment Horror* illustrates the less familiar scenario of an explicitly African character in a Japanese setting. Yet we see a similar pattern in the use of the African character's knowledge of imagined tradition, and of his physical bodily material, to aid the Japanese protagonist in his fight against evil, whether human or demonic. In closing, we consider the role of an imagined Africa in the world-view of Japanese musician Ryūichi Sakamoto, as represented by Japanese-American director Stephen Nomura Schible in his recent documentary *Coda: Ryuichi Sakamoto*. Sakamoto reflects upon Africa as the origin of humanity, and what this might mean for the future of our world in the Anthropocene era of climate change and associated natural disasters.

While the representations of an imagined Africa discussed below engage with the continent and its people as *pharmakon*, or both symptom and cure, for the ills of the Anthropocene era, it would be remiss to ignore the anti-black pitfalls of Anthropocene theory itself. 'Anthropocene thinking,' Axelle Karera argues, 'has generally been unable to yield a sustained critique of the racist origins of global warming capable, in turn, of exposing the limits of its desire to rethink—to "revamp" perhaps—the concept of the "human"' (2019: 38). Diana Leong similarly argues that blackness, 'is the spectre that haunts the Anthropocene and its possible futures' (2016: 15). The focus of all three films on disaster and violence as tied to space, location, or environment recalls the 'apocalyptic sensibilities' that Karera has identified as 'disavowing and erasing racial antagonisms' (2016: 34). The two methods that Karera identifies in this process — first, a '"hyper-ethics" predicated on the naturalization of relationality, mutual dependency, and other narratives of "species entanglements"' and second, 'an ahistorical and apolitical "hyper-valuation" of the concept of life' (2016: 34)—are all present in these films. Eduoardo Mendieta goes as far as to suggest 'Plantatiocene' as a more appropriate descriptor for the current era, linking 'the rise of racial capitalism with one of its essential institutions: the plantation' (2019: 87). These significant insights into race and Anthropocene ethics will allow us to expand Elsaesser's *pharmakon* through the film analysis below, and to recognize the limits of the films' what-if imaginaries.

EARLY EAST ASIAN IMAGINARIES OF AFRICA

In contrast to Sakamoto's hopeful vision, Chinese and Japanese imaginaries of Africa have long been pejorative. As the Portuguese, Spanish, and French enriched their metropoles through the objectification and commodification of diverse African tribes, the resulting *negros/nègres* became inexorably linked to an ontology of enslavement, an association carried over in the English word *Negro* (Edwards 2003: 26–27). This association of Africa and blackness with a state of enslavement and the non-human travelled to East Asia with the enslaved Africans who were brought to China as early as the ninth or twelfth century (Dikötter 1992: 15–17), and with the East Indian and African servants of European traders at the Japanese ports of Dejima and Nagasaki in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Russell 1991: 5). Yasuke, a Mozambican 'gifted' to warlord Oda Nobunaga by the Jesuit Alessandro Valignano, and whose real name history has not been remembered, is the most famous example of this historical practice. America was a key mediator in the development of an imagined Africa in Japan, as John Russell argues that the Japanese view of African people was shaped in part by the experiences of Japanese envoys dispatched to America in 1860, who 'accepted the institution of black slavery as a fact of life and viewed the African slaves they encountered as timid apelike creatures or as subhumans whom they equated with Japan's own outcastes' (Russell 1991: 5–6).

These historical impressions were entrenched by literary representations of an imagined Africa. For example, Fukuzawa Yukichi's (1835–1901) *An Outline of Civilization* (JPN: *Bunmei ron no gairyaku*, 1875) described the continent as a 'nadir' of civilization full of 'savages' (JPN: *yabanjin*) (Russell 1991: 6). Japanese literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries perpetuated this stereotype, borrowing the vocabulary of other colonial powers to describe Africa as a 'dark continent' (JPN: *ankoku tairiku*) (Russell 1991: 7). In China, philosopher Kang Youwei (1858–1927) published aggressively animalistic descriptions of African people with 'slanting jaws like a pig, front view like an ox… stupid like sheep or swine' (Kang 1956: 118–122, quoted in Dikötter 1997: 2). By the early twentieth century, Shu-Mei Shih argues, Africa in the

popular Chinese imaginary was 'assumed to be the last truly un-historical space, one peopled [sic] entirely by slaves' (2013: 158). The imagined Africa shown in imported films screened in the emerging cinema cultures of China and Japan largely echo this pejorative view, reflecting the relative weakness of national boundaries to contain 'blackness' as it historically refers to a state of enslavement.

SCREENING AFRICA IN JAPAN AND CHINA

In the early years of cinema culture in Japan, both documentary and fictionalised representations of other areas of the world were popular with critics and audiences. Representations of Africa and African people on film in Japan's early cinema history are found in imported film texts from Europe and America. For example, Martin and Osa Johnson's Africa-set films received high praise in the Japanese critical cinema press in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and imported films such as *Simba: The King of the Beasts* (Martin and Osa Johnson, 1928, shown in Japan as *Zamba*, 1929), *Ingagi* (William Campbell, 1930), *Africa Speaks!* (Walter Futter, 1931, shown in Japan in 1931), *Trader Horn* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1931) and *Congorilla* (Martin Johnson, 1932) achieved healthy box office takings (Fujita 2005). It is more difficult to chart the representation of Africa on Chinese screens in these early years, as local film operations tended to be specific to a particular city in the first decades of Chinese cinema, building towards transregional cooperation in the 1920s (Zhang 2010: 137). Still, an examination of magazine cultures shows that *Trader Horn* received significant coverage in Shanghai women's magazine *Linglong* (Edwards 2012: 582), suggesting that the partial location shooting in Africa may have been an attraction for Chinese audiences.

Images of an imagined Africa in imported documentary and fiction films inspired East Asian filmmakers in the next decades, as the popular Tarzan story became a media franchise. *Tarzan of the Apes* (Scott Sidney, 1918) was released in Japan as *Ruijin Tāzan* (literally, 'Humanoid Tarzan') on 14 June 1919, and the sequel, *The Romance of Tarzan* (Wilfred Lucas, 1918), translated as *Tāzan no Romansu*, followed six days later (Fujita 2005). Thirty-two Tarzan films were screened in Japan from 1921 to 1950, at a rate of almost one per year (Fujita 2005: 283–4), and Japanese-made Tarzan films began to appear from 1935. A Chinese Tarzan film is believed to have been made in 1938 (Tang 1975).

From the 1930s, the intensifying war in the Asia-Pacific altered the cinematic landscape in Japan and China, as well as both nations' outlook on the wider world. After Japan's defeat in 1945, Africa would be almost erased from the Japanese screen under the Allied Occupation (1945–1952), superseded by emerging alliances. By contrast, after the communist revolution of 1949, Chinese imaginaries of Africa saw a dramatic change, as political developments brought the two areas closer ideologically and practically.

ERASING BLACKNESS IN POSTWAR JAPANESE CINEMA

As Hiroshi Kitamura has argued, the censorship practices of the American-led Allied Occupation largely erased representations of blackness, including African representation, from the Japanese cinema screen (2012: 140). While Hollywood and other national cinemas did engage with issues of racism and inequality during this period, representations of Africa in the films imported to Japan tended towards the classic 'narratives of colonial and imperial adventures' identified by Kitamura (2012: 153), such as *King Solomon's Mines* (Compton Bennett, 1950), which was advertised as partly shot on location in Africa. Fourteen Tarzan films were also screened during the Occupation, despite the reluctance of censors (2012: 153). The Central Motion Picture Exchange, responsible for the distribution of imported films, described Africans in imported pictures as 'earth people' (*dojin*), and largely avoided mentioning them in marketing campaigns (Kitamura 2012: 153).

As John Russell notes, certain trends in this history of imagining Africa in Japanese popular culture continue today. The representation of African characters by black actors from other countries continues, as African-Americans in particular 'become the primary emblems of blackness' (1998: 165). More recently, *Doraemon: New Nobita's Great Demon—Peko and the Exploration Party of Five* (JPN: *Eiga Doraemon: Shin Nobita daimakyō peko to 5jin no tankentai*, Yakuwa Shinnosuke, 2014) featured Nobita and his friends travelling to Africa as part of a storyline in which they must go back in time to rescue themselves. While the Japanese children could all understand the speech of a magical dog character, the caricatured African natives in grass skirts clicked their tongues in a language unintelligible to the Japanese children.

Russell further argues that the on-going 'tendency to dehumanize and belittle blacks disguises another tendency, particularly in literary works, to employ the black Other as a reflexive symbol through which Japanese attempt to deal with their own ambiguous racio-cultural status in a Eurocentric world' (1991: 6). In the second part of this article, we will trace this tendency in contemporary Japanese film, and discuss how we can identify a similar process in Chinese film texts engaging with Africa.

POSTWAR CHINA RE-IMAGINES AFRICA

If Africa was erased from popular film culture in Japan, political developments after 1945 brought the continent into the everyday consciousness of those in mainland China. While in-depth engagement with these developments is outside the scope of this short article, the following historical moments should be considered relevant to the analysis of *Wolf Warrior II* which follows. Chinese imaginaries of Africa were shaped by the Bandung Conference of 1955. Held in Indonesia, the conference was the first meeting of African and Asian nations in the post-WWII era and was intended to forge new diplomatic alliances that extended beyond the established colonial geopolitics of the early twentieth century. As part of this vision to forge new alliances critical of the established geopolitics of the era, the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai engaged in three tours of Africa between 1963 and 1964 where he visited over 10 nations. Similarly, Chinese support for the creation of the Tanzanian-Zambian Railway between 1965 and 1975 further positioned the two regions 'as the front line in the global struggle against imperialism and capitalism in internationalist solidarity' (Shih 2013: 158). These actions appear to have been crucial to the PRC's global diplomatic recognition in the later half of the twentieth century. Twenty-six African votes in support of China were instrumental to its admission to the United Nations in 1971.

Chinese government scholarships that enabled African students to study at Chinese institutions began in 1961, however, violent conflicts between Chinese and African students caused the repatriation of over two-thirds of the visiting students in that year (Sullivan 1994). Opposition to the presence of African students in China continued into the 1970s and early 1980s, with riots against African students in Shanghai, Tianjin, Nanjing, Shenyang, Guangzhou, and Xian (Shih 2013: 158). Student demonstrations and riots flared up again in 1989 in Nanjing, Hangzhou, Beijing, and Wuhan. Anti-African sentiment clustered around the perceived better living conditions of African students, allegations of crimes committed by African visitors, and an imagined 'racial threat' from African male students dating Chinese female students (Shih 2013: 159). This last example in particular of these outbreaks of racist violence evinces how earlier Western natural historical discourses—that expressed sexual deviancy through race, and understood race as a marker of sexual deviancy—have travelled globally and linger insidiously (La Fleur 2018). Today, Africa's crucial geopolitical position in China's shift towards developmental diplomacy, such as the one belt, one road initiative, sets a rhetoric of friendship alongside the amplification of Sino-African animosities. These historical and contemporary tensions inform recent cinematic imaginaries of Africa in Chinese film.

AFRICA AS GENERIC SETTING IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE FILM

Despite historical, political, and economic engagement with the various nations of the African continent, and the increasing ease of filming on location, African settings are rarely given local specificity in contemporary Chinese cinema. For example, although *Wolf Warrior II* was partly filmed in Soweto, it is difficult to discern where the film is actually set. Paul Amar notes that multiple African-identified characters 'have Swahili names and speak English, implying an origin in Kenya or Tanzania' (2018). Yet the TV news is in French, suggesting that the action is taking place in the Congo. Furthermore, Amar suggests that 'the combination of mercenaries, epidemic, and insurgency resonates with West Africa (Liberia or Sierra Leone)' (2018). The result, he concludes, is that the continent becomes a series of 'fantasy lands and quarantine zones of "Africa"' (Amar 2018).

White characters, as well as Chinese protagonists, uphold the fiction of a unified and homogenous continent by repeating the phrase 'Welcome to Africa,' often in response to commentary on the lawless nature of the surroundings. This imagined Africa is beset by the usual stereotypes of violence, poverty, and ill-defined threats of an apparently occult nature. At the end of a long car chase, protagonist Leng Feng (played by director and co-writer Wu Jing) spots a shuffling crowd resembling zombies. As the slow-moving group bear down on Leng Feng and love interest Dr Rachael Smith (Cecilia Jade), he is told that they are simply hungry. One imagined-African stereotype is replaced by another as the 'zombies' are revealed to be starving people. Yet the pile of bodies beside Leng Feng's crashed vehicle are indeed infected by a virus, which he later contracts, blending both the everyday and occult stereotypes of an imagined Africa. The indiscriminate mixing of these two plot tropes associated with blackness recalls Karera's observation of 'the crucial role of anti-black victimization in our theorizing or in our imagining other futures' (2019: 47). Whether the black characters of *Wolf Warrior II* are understood as victims of a science fiction-type zombie virus, victims of hunger, or victims of a (now very real) infectious virus, their victimization is the cornerstone of the narrative that places Leng Feng as hero and saviour of China and Africa's shared future.

The virus plot trope echoes both generic stereotypes about Africa in the global imaginary, and China's particular historical relation to the continent. The virus renders African bodies zombie-like, while Leng Feng fights through his infection, recovering quickly. This disparity between the physical suffering of the African and Chinese characters mirrors 'the myth of "international syphilis" (*guoji meidu*),' which Frank Dikötter argues 'contrasted the pure blood of Chinese people with the polluted blood of outsiders' (1997: 26). Dikötter notes

that African students in particular were 'singled out for the AIDS test' in China, connecting the trope of blood-based contamination with China's experience of African student migration in the 1980s. Indeed, blood remains an 'ancient metaphor…a folk notion traveling incognito' within otherwise scientific and genetic contexts (Fields & Fields 2012: 53).

At the same time, however, the narrative use of the fictional Lamanla virus creates a counter-trope which we might call 'Africa as symptom and cure', echoing Elsaesser's *pharmakon* (2018: 19). The cure for the virus is literally embodied by Pasha, a young African girl entrusted to Leng Feng's care. Chinese-American Dr Rachael uses a serum developed from Pasha's immune body to reverse the virus infecting Leng Feng. In idyllic scenes of green fields and blue skies, inset between fight sequences that occur in dystopian concrete wastelands, Pasha shows a recovered Leng Feng how to use plants to poison his enemies. In the slight characterization of this young girl from a nameless African country, an imagined Africa is framed as a source of curative power, and African people are uniquely positioned to transmit the secrets of their natural world to the East Asian protagonist. Pasha is associated with the landscape of her continent through her knowledge of the natural world, and this continent is reflexively associated with curative power through Pasha's own literal embodiment of a cure for the virus. Yet as a child with little dialogue or agency, she is not presented as an equal to Leng Feng, and an East Asian male agent is made narratively necessary for her to activate this secret knowledge.

In fact, Zairong Xiang argues, 'Although the story takes place in Africa, the core of the film has little to do with Africa or Africans' (2018). Liu similarly connects the careless treatment of Africa as place to the marginalization of African characters (2018). Audiences have responded critically to this representation; for example, internet commentators in Malawi protested the film's representation of African characters as passive, and the continent as 'war-ravaged and disease-plagued,' noting that as in many Anglo-Euro-American representations, Africa is depicted as 'waiting for a saviour' (Galafa 2019: 3). This is certainly true of the majority of the thin characterizations of African people in *Wolf Warrior II*, yet a closer look at the characterization of Pasha suggests a parallel, though no less reductive, imaginary of Africa as *pharmakon*, both symptom and cure.

SCREEN SAVIOURS: IMAGINING AFRICANS IN JAPAN

In Ōtomo Katsuhiro's adaptation of Kon Satoshi's *World Apartment Horror*, an African character is introduced to the titular apartment building when its residents realise that the place has become haunted. While the African character is named Shandra in Kon's original manga, the film version has been re-named Angel, suggesting his narrative function. Angel claims to be a shaman able to exorcise demons, and so fellow day labourer Mohammed brings him to the apartment in order to free Japanese gangster Itta from his possession by a demon, originally housed within a tribal-looking mask. Angel towers above the other foreign residents of the apartment, and is further set apart by his independent circumstances. While the others cling to the apartment, which they claim as the 'last safe place where foreigners can live,' Angel sustains himself outside their community and appears stronger for it.

The African character is also favourably positioned in comparison to the Japanese protagonist, Itta. David Pollack argues of the manga text that, 'Itta's Japanese identity is established both in positive and negative terms, but always in relation to a new/old other, 'Asians,' a term now expanded to include Pakistanis and Africans' (1993: 689). Itta is 'less spiritually potent' than the African character (Pollack 1993: 689), who saves the residents from the demon that Itta has been unable to resist. While the Japanese protagonist is incapable of defending himself or others, there is some attempt to suggest that the evil at work is from elsewhere. The residents note that the mask originally haunted by the demon was not made by a Japanese artist, and Mohammed offers the opinion that 'The demon is also not Japanese.' Angel counters, 'Demons have no nationality' (JPN: *kokuseki ga nai*), displaying both a superior knowledge of the occult, and the lack of regional specificity common to representations of the imagined Africa described above.

Angel's knowledge of shamanic intervention is associated with his African identity in the beads and feathers that he wears to perform the ceremony, and in the language of his chants, which is clearly neither Japanese or English. Like Pasha in *Wolf Warrior II*, this archaic knowledge is complemented by his material body, which has its own curative power. After wrestling a chainsaw from the possessed Itta, Angel sits astride his chest, drawing markings on Itta's face using his own blood. The ritual seals Itta's mouth shut and calms him, before Angel defeats the demon in a final battle.

The key to the final battle, according to Angel, is to 'join as one,' just as the labourers of the Chinese factory in *Wolf Warrior II* are also recruited to act as one body. In the concluding paragraphs, we explore this association of an imagined Africa with communality, considering how East Asian imaginaries of Africa as tribal or emblematic of group harmony speak to contemporary anxieties. Examining the Africa described by Ryuichi Sakamoto, we consider the attraction of early histories of Africa to contemporary East Asian creators. In the vision of Africa invoked by Sakamoto, we can see the continent imagined as a cure for the ills of the modern world, both man-made and those expressed in nature.

CODA: IMAGINING A FUTURE WHERE AFRICA SOLVES ALL OUR PROBLEMS

In *Ryuichi Sakamoto: Coda*, an imagined Africa is presented as potential saviour, not only of Japan, but of the Anthropocene world as a whole. Japanese-American Steven Nomura Schible's documentary begins with Sakamoto's visit to the Fukushima region of Japan in the wake of the triple disaster of 2011, when the area suffered an earthquake, tsunami, and the failure of a nuclear power plant. Sakamoto's subsequent cancer diagnosis is implicitly connected to the destruction in Fukushima in the dark first half of the film. In the second half, a recovered Sakamoto details his many trips to remote areas of natural wonder to record other-worldly sounds for musical compositions. Discussing the threat posed to these areas, and the rest of the world, by climate change, Sakamoto introduces the idea of Africa as both the cradle of humanity, and as potential saviour for a species that has strayed from its connection to nature.

Over evocative footage of a traditionally dressed group of people in Northern Kenya jumping rhythmically to the sound of their own singing, Sakamoto describes Africa as the home of the rhythms of the world. Footage of the group is intercut with shots of the Turkana Boy site, as Sakamoto's voice describes the lake 'where the oldest human remains were found.' The group of singers is connected to the first people by these cross-cutting shots. Sakamoto recalls the village nearby as 'so austere,' painting a picture of a simple life lived in harmony with nature. He identifies the lineage of these villagers as 'our universal ancestors,' arguing that 'We are all African.' While this point notes the constructed nature of race, Sakamoto is also interested in the legacy of this 'first family' of around 30 people, who 'shared one language, one music.' 'They had one mythology. That's where we all began.' As the camera focuses closely on the faces of two singing women, Sakamoto wonders, 'What songs were sung? What was our first language?' 'What kind of music was played? How did it sound?'

Sakamoto and Schible weave the landscape and visual culture of this area of northern Kenya together with the villagers' singing to create a sensory impression that returning to this 'cradle of humanity' can somehow offset the terrible harm humans have caused to the planet, depicted in the preceding and subsequent scenes. Sakamoto's narration could be interpreted as a call to recognize our shared humanity, as people who once shared a 'first language.' Conversely, debates around the origins of humanity have more often been divisive, as demonstrated by the discovery of 'Peking Man.' Barry Sautman describes 'Peking Man' as a 'sinocentric view' of human evolution that posits that 'the earliest humans did not originate in Africa, but within the borders of present-day China' (1997: 84). After the 1995 discovery of early anthropoid fossils in Shanghuang, Jiangsu, Chinese media outlets claimed that the ancestors of humans had originated in East Asia (Xinhua 1995). As Sautman observes, this interpretation of the discovery was a nationalist move, seeking to distance contemporary China from the global origin story 'out of Africa,' and building towards a claim for Chinese society and culture as the oldest in the world.

By contrast, Sakamoto invokes Africa and its musical cultures to insist upon our shared humanity, and the contingent shared responsibility for our world. Sakamoto's discursive use of an imagined early Africa is reminiscent of the narrative trope we identified in recent Japanese and Chinese cinema, in that he travels back to an imagined traditional era in order to solve contemporary and future problems. Elsaesser considers the time travel narrative trope central to the mind-game film, connecting 'multiple temporalities' and 'non-linearity in the narrative trajectory' to the term *pharmakon* through Jacques Derrida's re-reading of Plato, which popularized the concept (2018: 3). In the examples analysed above, we have argued for understanding the role of an imagined Africa and the physicality of African-identified characters as *pharmakon* tropes in *Wolf Warrior II* and *World Apartment Horror*, emblematic of both the problems of the globalized Anthropocene, and of potential solutions. These solutions always invoke an element of time travel, in that they require accessing knowledge systems and wisdoms perceived to belong to an 'older' time, as well as an Other place. Sakamoto literally expresses a desire to travel back to an imagined earlier point in human development, as an implied corrective to the environmental issues discussed in the first section of the documentary.

However, recalling Karera's reminder about the associations of blackness with victimhood, and the erasure of race in conceptions of the Anthropocene as anticipating 'a post-apocalyptic "recalibration" of anti-black racist practices' (Karera 2019: 34), we must remain sceptical of the empowering aspects of the *pharmakon* motif. Elsaesser invokes René Girard's elaboration 'that aligns the *pharmakon* with the *pharmakos* (scapegoat)' (2018: 35), reminding us that Africa has often been imagined as a place from which to disassociate in the drive towards modernization. Elsaesser considers the mind-game film, which we have argued offers a model for analysing the three films discussed here, as *pharmakon* in itself – 'gift, poison and outcast – in a world of rupture and transition' (2018: 35). The mind-game film as *pharmakon* heals 'the rift between subject and world with the very means of disorientation, rupture and re-assembly' (2018: 35). Yet thinking of an imagined Africa as another *pharmakon* within the mind-game film genre, we must ask what is ruptured, and who is left out in the re-assembly? While many areas within Africa today exemplify the problems of late capitalism in the Anthropocene age (as do many areas of the world), filmmakers and their subjects in East

Asia seem to suggest that the solution to these problems can also be found on the African continent. At the same time however, in representing Africa as the cure for our modern ills, Africa as *pharmakon* is frequently made scapegoat, or sacrificed, to the restorative narratives of East Asian male protagonists.

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING AFRICA AS *PHARMAKON*

This is not the first time Africa and blackness have taken on cultural panaceatic properties for overdeveloped nations. The global popularity of jazz, rag-time, and the blues in music, and Primitivism in art practices in the early twentieth century registered a cultural crisis among white Western men, who sought somehow to revitalize themselves even as they suffered the logical maladies of what Jamaican cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter might call their own psychic self-colonization. Wynter contends that, with the Enlightenment, the European underwent a transformation in self-inscription. Rather than understanding himself in primarily religious terms as the Christian Man, the European began to understand himself as Western Man, a political subject, a self-possessor, a holder of rationality and ambition—what Wynter terms 'Man1' (Wynter 2003). In becoming Man1 the European had to repress in himself the irrational, the natural, not the self-possessing but the possessed, and the black would become and continue to be the embodied negation of the white man's being. Though Wynter does not use the term Anthropocene, her central argument is linked to the question of human futures. 'This issue is that of the genre of the human, the issue whose target of abolition is the ongoing collective production of our present ethnoclass mode of being human, Man: above all, its overrepresentation of its well-being as that of the human species as a whole, rather than as it is veridically: that of the Western and westernized (or conversely) global middle classes' (Wynter 2003: 313).

Returning to the fundamental premise of mind-game films as what-ifs, we ask, what are the what-ifs of these films? In positing Africa as *pharmakon* in the way that Western culture has historically posited Africa and blackness as *pharmakon*, Chinese and Japanese film directors enact a what-if that comes dangerously close to simply replacing the overrepresented Western Man with an overrepresented East Asian Man. The global futures imagined in these films do not 'revamp…the concept of the human' as Karera argues is necessary; nor is the category of Wynterian Man dismantled to include all of humanity. Even Sakamoto's ostensibly positive imagining of Africa requires it to remain the eternal source of non-Man from which Man can draw. As scapegoat, Africa remains inscribed outside the category of Man, the source of and solution to disasters both natural and man-made, problematically sustaining the conception of the human known as Man in an East Asian reboot.

NOTE

1 With the exception of rare films such as Hani Susumu's *A Tale of Africa* (JPN: *Afurika monogatari*, 1981), set and filmed in Kenya, and Hani's *The Song of Bwana Toshi* (JPN: *Bwana toshi no uta*, 1965).

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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