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Shaolin Without Borders: Assemblage, Adaptation and the Politics of Culture in China–Zambia Relations

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Abstract

Studies on Chinese cultural and religious engagement abroad are often framed through the lens of state-driven soft power. Drawing on the case study of the Zambia Shaolin Cultural Center (ZSSC), I challenge this state-centric interpretation, emphasizing the collaborative, relational, and fluid nature of China–Africa cultural and religious encounters. Inspired by “assemblage thinking” and based on fieldwork observation and interviews, I examine the heterogeneity, fluidity, and adaptability of Shaolin’s operations in Zambia. I argue that ZSSC should be viewed as an evolving assemblage where diverse actors and elements interact and co-create meaning through adaptation and negotiation.

Résumé

Les recherches sur l’engagement culturel et religieux de la Chine à l’étranger sont fréquemment abordées sous l’angle du soft power étatique. En m’appuyant sur l’analyse de cas du Zambia Shaolin Cultural Center (ZSSC), je conteste cette interprétation axée sur l’État, en mettant en exergue le caractère collaboratif, relationnel et dynamique des interactions culturelles et religieuses entre la Chine et l’Afrique. S’inspirant de la « pensée assemblage » et reposant sur des observations de terrain ainsi que sur des entretiens, je procède à une analyse de l’hétérogénéité, de la fluidité et de l’adaptabilité des opérations de Shaolin en Zambie. Je soutiens que le ZSSC doit être considéré comme un ensemble évolutif dans lequel divers acteurs et éléments interagissent et co créent du sens à travers l’adaptation et la négociation.

Resumo

Os estudos sobre o envolvimento cultural e religioso chinês no estrangeiro apresentam, com frequência, à luz de um *soft power* promovido pelo Estado. Com base no estudo de

caso do Centro Cultural Shaolin da Zâmbia (ZSCC), é essa interpretação centrada no Estado que o presente artigo contesta, centrando-se, em vez disso, na natureza colaborativa, relacional e fluida dos encontros culturais e religiosos entre a China e a África. Procurando inspiração no «pensamento de assemblagem», e partindo de observações e entrevistas de campo, analisa-se a heterogeneidade, a fluidez e a adaptabilidade das atividades do Centro Shaolin na Zâmbia. E defende-se que o ZSCC deve ser visto como uma assemblagem em evolução, onde os diversos atores e elementos interagem e, em conjunto, criam significados através da adaptação e da negociação.

Keywords: Shaolin Temple; Chinese Buddhism; Zambia; China–Zambia; Kung Fu; soft power

Introduction

On the outskirts of Lusaka, a distinctive cluster of yellow-walled, red-roofed buildings rises from the landscape. Designed in traditional Chinese Buddhist architectural style, the compound is home to the Zambia Shaolin Cultural Center (ZSCC), the first Shaolin Temple in Africa. Far more than a visual anomaly, its presence marks the emergence of a less examined yet increasingly significant facet of China–Africa relations, echoing Anedo’s (2012) and Deng’s (2025) calls for greater attention to the “cultural” and “religious” dimensions of China–Africa relations.

The Shaolin Monastery (also known as Shaolin or Shaolin Temple) was founded in the fifth century *CE* in Dengfeng, Henan Province. The monastery is currently led by abbot Shi Yinle, who replaced the former abbot Shi Yongxin in July 2025 after the latter came under investigation for financial and sexual misconduct, in a process that observers describe as highly politicized (Law 2025). Shaolin is also known as the birthplace of Chan Buddhism and the cradle of Shaolin kung fu (Shahar 2008). Its international expansion, especially through the establishment of branches, performances, and training programs, offers a window into how Chinese religious organizations project cultural influence through both spiritual and embodied practices. Compared with other instruments of cultural diplomacy or soft power, such as Confucius Institutes (CIs) or Chinese state media (Repnikova 2022; Li 2023), Shaolin occupies a unique niche at the intersection of religion, culture, and commerce, representing a more grass-roots, bottom-up approach in China’s engagement with Africa.

Despite growing interest in China–Africa relations, much of the existing work has focused primarily on the political, economic, and social dimensions of the relationship. A growing body of China–Africa literature has examined political cooperation (e.g., Hackenesch and Bader 2020), economic engagement—particularly aid (e.g., Brautigam 2010; Zhang and Huang 2023)—development finance (e.g., Moyo 2020), and foreign direct investment (e.g., Li, Kopiński and Taylor 2022; Kopiński, Carmody and Taylor 2023), as well as the lives of Chinese migrants and (racialized) labor relations between Chinese and African peoples (e.g., Sautman and Yan 2016; Park 2019). In examining China–Africa encounters, scholars have identified Chinese-invested or financed railways, roads, parliaments, farms, mines, and special economic zones as the primary sites of China–Africa engagement (e.g., Cowaloosur and Taylor 2018; Driessen 2019; Batsani-Ncube 2022; Wang 2023;

Zajontz et al., 2023). However, with such strong focus on the material dimension, the role of culture and religion remains marginalized, even as it becomes increasingly important in shaping everyday China–Africa encounters. Chinese cultural and religious organizations, especially Buddhist organizations, are playing increasing active roles in Africa (Shi and Li 2022; Shi 2024; Qiu 2024). One of the most prominent actors is ZSCC, a transnational extension of Shaolin, which represents a unique site where Chinese Buddhist traditions intersect with Zambian cultural and religious landscapes, deeply rooted in Christian faith, diverse cultural traditions, and norms.

While ZSCC has attracted increasing attention within Zambian society and among global social media influencers, such as IShowSpeed, who livestreamed his kung fu training at ZSCC, no academic study has systematically examined the organization. By situating Shaolin's first African branch within the broader landscape of Chinese cultural and religious outreach, this article addresses several questions: What motivated Shaolin to establish an institutional presence in Zambia? What are the key functions and everyday practices of ZSCC? How is the center received, negotiated, and potentially reinterpreted by various local actors? And in what ways does ZSCC reflect and shape broader processes of cultural exchange, religious pluralism, and the promotion of soft power within evolving China–Africa relations?

By using ZSCC as a case study, the article contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that seeks to understand China–Africa relations beyond material dimensions, state-to-state cooperation and top-down approaches. It also builds on Benabdallah's (2020) work to approach China–Africa relations from a relational perspective, as the everyday operations of ZSCC illuminate a more affective, interpersonal, and community-based encounter between Chinese and African actors. These relational dynamics, expressed through shared rituals, performances, and local collaborations, play an important role in shaping perceptions, fostering interpersonal networks, and reconfiguring how China's presence is understood and negotiated on the ground.

Inspired by assemblage thinking and drawing on multi-sited fieldwork and interviews in Beijing, Dengfeng (Henan province), and Lusaka, I examine ZSCC as an evolving assemblage: a site where diverse Chinese and African monks, bureaucrats, and local communities interact, co-creating meaning and practice. My analysis is built on qualitative data that were collected between 2019 and 2023, including one field trip to Dengfeng, one to Beijing, and three to Lusaka. My fieldwork was approved by Shaolin's headquarters and ZSCC. Apart from fieldwork observations, I also conducted both formal and informal interviews with relevant stakeholders. These include Chinese and African monks based in Shaolin's headquarters and its Zambian branch, Chinese and African staff at ZSCC, as well as Chinese and Zambian government officials, including Chinese diplomats stationed in Zambia and Zambian officials from various departments.

During my fieldwork in Lusaka, I participated in the daily activities at ZSCC (e.g., training and teaching sessions). I also attended events coordinated by the Chinese embassy and companies in Lusaka, during which ZSCC was invited to perform kung fu. I further triangulated my firsthand data with secondary sources, including Chinese and English-language media reports, videos, photographs, and other internal materials from ZSCC and its headquarters. I conducted supplementary

virtual ethnographic research by closely following staff from ZSCC on social media, including their WeChat, TikTok, and Little Red (小红书) accounts.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: It begins with a literature review on China's cultural and religious engagement with Africa. It then provides a brief introduction on the Shaolin Monastery and its flagship initiative that provides training opportunities for African kung fu enthusiasts—the African Kung Fu Training Program. It then offers background information about the establishment of ZSCC, and more specifically its political economy. Following that, it unpacks assemblage thinking and discusses how this framework can help us understand the everyday operations of ZSCC. Finally, it summarizes the key arguments and contributions of this article and identifies directions for future research.

China's cultural and religious engagement with Africa

China's engagement with Africa has attracted increasing attention in academic debates, media coverage, and policy discussions, especially in light of the Belt and Road Initiative and the growing geopolitical competition between China and the West. Much of the existing literature has focused on the political and economic dimensions of the relationship, approaching China's engagement with Africa from the perspectives of international relations, (international) political economy, the politics of development or through economic theories (e.g., Oqubay and Lin 2019; Li, Kopiński and Taylor 2022; Wang 2023). China's cultural and religious engagement with Africa remains underexplored, despite its growing significance in shaping everyday interactions on the ground (Monson and Rupp 2013; Qiu 2024).

While some scholars have examined Chinese cultural diplomacy in Africa, the majority of this stream of literature focuses on state-backed institutions, particularly the expansion of the CIs in Africa, which promote Chinese language and culture (e.g., King 2013; Wheeler 2014; Repnikova 2022). These contributions not only highlight the motivations of Chinese educational actors in strengthening cultural and educational cooperation with Africa but, more importantly, they also emphasize African agency—or the lack thereof—in different African contexts, and how various African students and educational organizations may perceive and interact with CIs in Africa. Scholars also point out the operational challenges faced by CIs—for instance, the limited international cultural training provided to the teachers dispatched to Kenya (Wheeler 2014), a lack of attention to the quality of student–teacher interaction in South Africa (Procopio 2015), as well as the clear gaps between the rising expectations of local administrators and students and the limited resources available on the ground in Ethiopia (Repnikova 2022). This stream of literature on CIs generally reflects broader scholarly debates about China's soft power deficit, which is also described as “partial power” (Shambaugh 2013), due to its rather limited influence. However, the focus on CIs only provides limited insights as it tends to obscure the plurality of actors involved in cultural engagement and overlooks other initiatives that are not led by the state. The expansion of Chinese religious organizations in

Africa, for instance, is not driven by the state, yet these groups are becoming key cultural players in Africa–China relations. Research on the role of Chinese religious organizations, and their interactions with relevant African stakeholders, along with the implications and consequences of their growing influence, remains very limited.

Within this sparse literature, there are several important contributions on Chinese religious and spiritual organizations in Africa. For instance, Shi's (2024) work on the Chinese cult of Guandi in Mauritius. According to Shi (2024), while Guandi has been regarded as the God of War in ancient China and offers spiritual protection for early Chinese migrants during their transoceanic journey towards the Indian Ocean, the main temple in Mauritius stands in sharp contrast with state-endorsed, land-based Guandi temples in China. Buddhist organizations such as the Amitofo Care Center in Malawi, Mozambique, and other countries in Africa, and Foguangshan in South Africa, have also received some scholarly attention, yet it should be noted that these centers are linked to Taiwanese Buddhist organizations with headquarters in Taipei (Reinke 2020; Shi and Li 2022; Sheridan 2024).

Shi and Li (2022) provide a general introduction to Chinese Buddhist networks and organizations operating in Africa. In contrast to Hinduism, which has been “localized” to varying degrees and often run by African locals, Chinese Buddhism has often been viewed as “theologically resilient” and largely “diasporic” (Qiu 2024, 98), mainly playing an active role in Chinese communities in Africa (Clasquin-Johnson 2017; Reinke 2020). Qiu's (2024) ethnographic study, drawing on her fieldwork in the Tanhua Monastery in Dar es Salaam, explores the cultivation of Chinese Buddhist spirituality in Tanzania, offering a rare glimpse into how Chinese migrant monks present Chinese Buddhism beyond the Chinese ethnic community in Africa. Whether or how Chinese Buddhist organizations' activities are being adapted to the African context, however, deserves further exploration.

Shaolin's expansion in Africa is a relatively new phenomenon. While it has received some media coverage and considerable attention on social media platforms (e.g., TikTok), it has yet to attract scholarly attention. Nevertheless, with its quick development, ZSCC has already become one of the largest Buddhist organizations in Africa. The influence of Shaolin in Zambia and its broader impact across the continent deserves both empirical investigation and nuanced analysis.

Moreover, in the Zambian context, the religious and cultural dimensions of China–Zambia relations have seldom been addressed in academic debates. The deepening of Zambia's relationship with China has often been characterized by the construction of the TAZARA railway (Monson 2009), the establishment of an overseas office for the Bank of China in 1997, the creation of Africa's first special economic zone (Kragelund 2009), and increasing Chinese investment in the country (Li 2025). However, the frequent interactions of ZSCC within Zambia raise new questions regarding the possibility for covenantal pluralism within the country (Haynes 2024). Specifically, how and to what extent can Chinese religious practices coexist with Zambia's deeply entrenched Christian faith and diverse cultural traditions?

In 1991, Zambian president Frederick Chiluba declared the country a “Christian nation.” Since then, many evangelical churches and ministries with

American roots have established a presence in Zambia (Simuchimba 2001). While Christianity is the predominant faith, Zambia remains a multiethnic, multiracial, and multireligious society. It is also one of Africa's predominantly heterogeneous countries in terms of ethnic groups, each characterized by its unique cultural and traditional orientation (Oliver et al. 2021). As noted by Taylor (2006), postcolonial Zambia exists in a far more globalized environment today, making it subject to both secular and nonsecular influences. While Zambia's worldview has been significantly shaped by Western religions and culture, the role of Chinese religion and culture remains less understood, particularly from an empirical perspective. ZSCC thus provides a unique lens for examining the intersection of Chinese religious practices and African cultural contexts, especially given that Zambia's culture and religion are deeply rooted in Christian traditions and indigenous customs, which contrast starkly with Shaolin's cultural heritage. The development and expansion of Shaolin in Africa thus offer us essential empirical material for exploring the role of Chinese religious organizations in shaping contemporary African cultural and religious landscapes.

Shaolin's African Kung Fu Training Program

As a World Heritage site, numerous African leaders and journalists have visited the Shaolin Monastery and, gradually, Shaolin established connections with numerous African countries. In 2008, the then Abbot Shi Yongxin traveled to South Africa to introduce Shaolin's philanthropic work to Nelson Mandela. As Shi recalled, Mandela praised the universal value of Shaolin culture, stating that Mandela had said "The Shaolin culture is of value to humankind. It should be respected and praised by every single human being."¹ Mandela's endorsement reinforced Shi Yongxin's determination to further spread Shaolin culture in Africa.

In 2013, together with the Chinese Ministry of Culture and the Henan Provincial Department of Culture, Shaolin organized the first African Kung Fu Training Program. The program experienced a hiatus during the COVID-19 pandemic but resumed in 2023, as China reopened. African trainees (predominantly from Francophone countries) were offered opportunities to participate in kung fu training and immerse themselves in Shaolin. Each cohort of trainees completes a comprehensive three-month training and living regimen at Shaolin's headquarters—the Song Mountain. The curriculum covers a variety of subjects, including kung fu, meditation, Chinese language, calligraphy, and Zen medicine.

During the program, African trainees are not only exposed to traditional Chinese kung fu, but are also encouraged to draw parallels with Africa's rich cultural tapestry and vibrant martial arts traditions, which incorporate "Combat + Spirituality + Dance" as their foundational elements (Rodrigue 2018, 11). Despite the distinct differences between Shaolin kung fu and various African martial arts, many African trainees have shown a strong interest in blending the techniques they learned at Shaolin with their own martial arts practices. Through this program, Shaolin has also expanded its network in Africa, embodying what Benabdallah (2020) identifies as "relational productive power" as it has

strengthened its relational network across the continent. Shaolin's leadership is proud of their reach and influence in various African countries, often highlighted with the phrase, "We have people in many countries in Africa."² By 2023, more than 140 participants from 22 African countries had taken part in the program. Many of them have since played active roles in promoting Shaolin kung fu and culture in their home countries and beyond, especially by mentoring and cultivating the next generation of practitioners.³ For instance, Max Yollando from Côte d'Ivoire participated in the program in 2015 and stayed at the headquarters for another five years to continue his kung fu learning. He now works at ZSCC. Yanlun, the headmaster of ZSCC, shared:

If the establishment of the Shaolin Cultural Center in Zambia is likened to a fruit, then the seed was planted more than 10 years ago, especially through the Shaolin Kung Fu African Trainees program.... Through the program, Shaolin has nurtured many African talents and expanded its network in Africa, and we are very proud of it.⁴

The establishment of the Zambia Shaolin Cultural Center (ZSCC)

ZSCC was formally established in December 2021. It serves as the headquarters for the China Songshan Shaolin Cultural Center in Africa and currently houses 229 Buddhist statues. It cost US\$5.8 million to build ZSCC, which occupies a 20,000-square-meter plot of land donated by Chinese businessman Jiang Qingde.⁵ Jiang is the chairman of the Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group, which began its operations in Africa in the early 1990s. His business portfolio spans multiple sectors, including construction, hospitality, mining, and real estate development, with operations and companies in mainland China, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique, among other countries.⁶ He is one of the most influential Chinese businesspeople in Southern Africa. Jiang has been involved in multiple contract dispute cases since 2020. In recent years, he has been reprimanded by the Shanghai Stock Exchange for violations relating to information disclosure. I attempted to approach him during fieldwork, through several Chinese business leaders, but he was unwilling to give an interview due to the business controversies surrounding him. Thus, the real reason Jiang decided to donate to ZSCC remains unknown and people have offered different interpretations.

Despite his business controversies, Jiang is regarded by some in the Chinese community in Africa as someone who cultivates *gongde* (功德).⁷ An anonymous Chinese businessperson based in Lusaka, who knows Jiang, explained that Jiang is a Buddhist and a wealthy individual pursuing spiritual cultivation.⁸ His house in Zambia is located next door to ZSCC and is decorated in similar style, with many Buddhist elements included. According to Shi Yongxin, Jiang's early years were deeply influenced by Buddhism as he spent much of his childhood with a senior monk in his home village in Anhui. Shi Yongxin shared a story to illustrate Jiang's involvement in the establishment of ZSCC through the Buddhist notion of causal conditions (*yinyuan*, 因缘): "Once upon a time,

nestled within a mountain range, there was a temple. Deep within the temple's tranquil halls, a senior monk recounted stories to a young disciple."⁹ Shi refers to the young disciple as Jiang.

However, others interpret Jiang's contribution to Shaolin more pragmatically. His donation to ZSCC has also been viewed as strategic leverage to strengthen his cultural and social capital, especially by creating goodwill among African elites. Based on an analysis of media coverage and interviews with other Chinese business leaders, Jiang has, over the past two decades, interacted closely with senior African government officials—including presidents of several African countries—and directly negotiated business deals (especially in mining) with top leaders.¹⁰ His involvement in ZSCC can therefore also be seen as part of his personal and business branding, or as part of the corporate social responsibility of his company.

While Jiang has supported ZSCC, he does not engage in the daily operation of the center. The center is run through collaboration between Chinese and African personnel. It currently houses three Chinese monks and three African warrior monks (*wuseng*, 武僧), as well as over thirty Zambian children. The headmaster, Yanlun, is responsible for overseeing monastery reception duties. Yankun, who holds a Master's degree from Henan University, teaches Chinese language and cultural classes. Yanchen also manages logistics and teaches Shaolin kung fu alongside the three African warrior monks: Max Yollando, Emmanuel Ngallie, and Ronald Mwale.

Yollando was the first African warrior monk to join ZSCC. He also serves as the de facto "public relations officer" of ZSCC. Ngallie, from Cameroon, is the chief warrior monk at ZSCC, and the vice president of the African Shaolin Federation. Both Yollando and Ngallie speak fluent English, French, and Mandarin. Both of them took part in the African Kung Fu Training Program and then spent several years at Shaolin's headquarters. Following the establishment of ZSCC, Ronald Mwale, a Zambian, underwent kung fu training and officially joined ZSCC in April 2024. The three African staff are not just instructors: they also help manage the center, especially when it comes to coordinating and communicating with Zambian stakeholders. They also regularly perform with the children at ZSCC events organized by the Chinese embassy, Chinese associations and Chinese companies, as well as during various activities organized by Zambian communities.¹¹

While the founding of ZSCC benefited from Jiang's financial support its daily operations are sustained by Chinese community leaders and associations in Zambia. As Li and Shi (2020) observe, Chinese associations in Zambia act as intermediaries for cultural and philanthropic activities. Community-based associations often organize events that are designed to promote Chinese culture and improve the local perception of Chinese presence. For instance, every month, the Zambia Chinese Association donates maize flour to ZSCC. Moreover, the chairperson of the Henan Hometown Association contributed US\$70,000 to cover most of the international travel costs for the first African kung fu Games.¹² The annual operational expenses of ZSCC amount to approximately RMB1.5 million, and most of the financial resources are sourced from donations provided by Chinese enterprises and associations in Zambia.¹³

This strong financial and organizational support from the Chinese community reflects that the center is more than just a religious site. It also serves as a

cultural, educational, and charitable center (as explored later), offering a sense of solidarity, shared identity, and even Chinese national pride. For many Chinese migrants, the center is a familiar and comforting space where they can speak their language, practice traditions, celebrate festivals, and connect with others, helping to ease the sense of alienation that often comes with living far from home. Interestingly, Chinese business leaders and associations also appear to compete for influence as their ability to support the center's growth demonstrates cultural and social capital as well as leadership within the Chinese community. For instance, when Shi Yongxin visited Zambia, there was notable competition among Chinese business or community leaders over who could stand closer to the Abbot.

While both Jiang and the Chinese communities in Zambia have provided significant support to ZSCC, its development, especially from a long-term perspective, relies heavily on the local communities. Both Chinese and African staff at ZSCC believe that relying solely on support from local Chinese communities cannot guarantee the center's long-term sustainability. They acknowledge the importance of support from Zambian communities corporations to achieve more sustainable development in the country.¹⁴ Thus, the management of ZSCC is exploring ways to gain greater support from Zambians, including extending services to local communities and experimenting with commercial options such as offering paid kung fu training for enthusiasts. By simultaneously serving overlapping functions for both Chinese and Zambians—providing spiritual and cultural identity and a sense of belonging for Chinese while offering practical, cultural, and educational resources for Zambians—the center becomes a shared site of meaning. This dual role enhances ZSCC's legitimacy and visibility and creates interesting dynamics of representation, expectation, and identity negotiation that shape how it is perceived and sustained in Zambia.

Assemblage thinking

Introduced by Deleuze and Guattari (1980), the term “assemblage,” drawn from the French word *agencement*, describes the process through which human and nonhuman components—including not only the corporeal and the substantial, but also the discursive such as ideas and policies—are brought together in a rhizomatic organization, which is decentralized and nonhierarchical. An assemblage, then, is not a whole in its nature but a forever shifting collection of diverse elements that come together in specific contexts. These elements, while seemingly heterogeneous, are in fact interconnected, influencing and fusing into one another in complex and often nonlinear ways. DeLanda (2006) further solidifies the relevance of assemblage theory by offering a pointed critique of conventional approaches reliant on totalities and essences, challenging rigid ways of thinking about power and social structures.

Assemblage thinking, as suggested by Baker and McGuirk (2017), thus serves as a methodological practice that moves beyond simple explanations that attribute outcomes to monolithic entities or taken-for-granted structures. Instead, it encourages us to embrace the multiplicity of actors and factors at

play, recognizing that power is dispersed and relational. Rather than assuming fixed geographic or conceptual boundaries, assemblage thinking prompts us to “trace sites and situations” (Baker and McGuirk 2017, 425), following the links and flows that constitute the phenomenon under investigation. This involves considering the different interests of certain companies, local communities, government agencies, and the influence of cultural instruments and development models.

Scholars have also used assemblage thinking to unpack the complexities of China–Africa encounters. Studies on Chinese infrastructure projects (Han and Webber 2020; Franceschini 2024), the Chinese construction industry in Congo-Brazzaville (Ning 2024), Chinese health initiatives in Africa (Fei 2022), and the evolving urban landscapes shaped by Chinese presence (Li and Siame 2020) all highlight the analytical utility of thinking with assemblage theory. Grounded in empirical evidence, these studies each provide nuanced insights into power dynamics, internal diversity, and the multiple logics at play within these relationships, offering a more sophisticated comprehension of what we mean by “agency.”

In assemblages, agency is distributed rather than concentrated. Bruno Latour (2005), arguing against traditional views that rest solely on human actors and dismiss the role of nonhuman entities, proposes that agency is not an inherent property of humans but a product of relationships arising from interactions within a network. He broadens the notion of agency beyond human actors, referring to anything that has a modifying effect or alters a situation—or, in his words, a “source of action,” as an “actant” (Latour 1996, 373). Applying this to ZSCC allows for a departure from simplistic narratives of one-dimensional cultural transfer or Chinese soft power. Instead, we can see the center as an assemblage, a dynamic and evolving institution shaped by the interplay of numerous actants. These include not only the Chinese monks and Zambian practitioners but also the surrounding cultural milieu, the architectural design of the temple, the symbolism embedded in religious practices, the appeal of martial arts, and more.

In this light, assemblage thinking offers a valuable tool for moving beyond static analyses and encourages us to consider the center as a site of ongoing “becoming” (McFarlane and Anderson 2011). Within this framework, relationships between actants are constantly in flux, changing and adapting in response to internal and external forces. New actors may emerge, existing alliances may shift, and the very nature of the assemblage transforms over time. The path of becoming is never predetermined but is open-ended, hence providing a fresh perspective for understanding the subtle and unpredictable unfolding of ZSCC.

Assembling ZSCC: Assembling a site for multifaceted functions

Assemblage thinking emphasizes the circulation of elements, particularly how they gather, intersect, and disperse alongside other agents and actors across multiple scales. In this article, I examine the operation of ZSCC as an evolving, heterogeneous assemblage that is fluid in form and serves multiple overlapping

functions, including cultural, charitable, educational, and religious activities. These activities and sites often intersect with, reinforce, and shape one another. The section below explores how ZSCC functions simultaneously as a cultural, religious, charitable, and educational site, and how these intertwined roles contribute to the broader process of assembling.

ZSCC as a cultural site

The Zambia Shaolin Cultural Center, as its name suggests, operates as a vibrant cultural site. Shaolin's rich cultural heritage, including its practices of Zen Buddhism and kung fu, is actively promoted by the center through different kinds of engagement with the public. Chinese and African Masters interact with visitors about a variety of cultural topics, including the Chinese language, Buddhist philosophy, calligraphy, traditional etiquette, and theories of traditional Chinese medicine.

Among the various cultural practices promoted by ZSCC, kung fu stands at the heart of its cultural engagement with Zambians. It plays a central role in the everyday life of the children and staff at the center. Shaolin kung fu is not just about physical combat but it is also deeply connected to Buddhist philosophy and spiritual practice, particularly Zen Buddhism. Its training includes meditation, mindfulness, and ethical lessons that embody Buddhist principles such as kindness, self-control, and the cultivation of inner tranquility. Although Shaolin kung fu is often viewed as a cultural performance, it also has a religious aspect, which emphasizes the integral link between physical movement and spiritual development, as well as the pursuit of both external strength and internal wisdom. As the kung fu training at ZSCC is primarily conducted by African warrior monks, their approach tends to focus less on the spiritual and religious aspects of kung fu. According to Yollando, these elements may be too advanced or challenging for children at their current developmental stage.¹⁵ In fact, the training offered by ZSCC differs in its approaches from that offered at the Shaolin headquarters in the Song Mountain. At ZSCC, kung fu training also includes female students, whereas female students (except some international participants) are not usually accepted at the headquarters.

To improve its financial situation, ZSCC initiated a community outreach project that offers kung fu training to people outside the center. As outlined in ZSCC's brochure, this program is open to anyone aged six and above, regardless of gender. Beyond regular training, ZSCC has also become active in hosting kung fu competitions. For instance, in June 2023, ZSCC hosted the first-ever African Shaolin Kung Fu Games in Lusaka. This six-day event brought together more than 150 participants from 23 African countries (Xinhua 2023). During this time, the center hosted the Shaolin African Union Founding Conference and the first African Shaolin Kung Fu Duan Pin System Training Class.

Kung fu and martial arts associations in other African countries also contributed to the process of assembling. ZSCC acts as a site for Shaolin to network with other kung fu/martial arts associations in Africa. For instance, the coordination of the inaugural African Shaolin Kung Fu Games in 2023 demonstrated the

effectiveness of the African kung fu training program in fostering a broad and engaged community, which subsequently strengthened Shaolin's influence across the continent. Beyond organizing events, ZSCC is actively involved in attracting kung fu and martial arts associations for training and collaboration. For instance, Emmanuel Ngallie from ZSCC has organized various events designed to attract other associations to visit the center and participate in training sessions.

Moreover, food plays a role in the cultural practices at ZSCC. Following the Shaolin tradition, the center provides *zhai fan* (斋饭), known as "vegetarian meal" or "fasting meal," which is offered as part of Buddhist monastic practice and reflects Buddhist principles of purity, compassion, and respect for all living beings. At ZSCC, the cultural fusion between Shaolin and Zambia is evident in the meals served, which often incorporate traditional Zambian dishes such as Nshima, made from maize flour and water and cooked by Zambian chefs. The fusion of Shaolin and Zambian food traditions not only facilitates cultural adaptation but also illustrates the assemblage-like nature of ZSCC's everyday practices, where different cultural elements converge and are rearticulated.

ZSCC as a religious site

As a Buddhist center, ZSCC naturally functions as a site for religious practice. The Zambian constitution guarantees freedom of worship and propagation (Simuchimba 2001). This legal framework allows foreign religious groups like Shaolin to establish a presence in Zambia. Nevertheless, public perceptions of Shaolin's presence in Zambian society remain mixed. While Zambia has the highest percentage of Christians in Africa, evidence suggests that this does not necessarily mean all Christians in the country "see eye to eye or that they respect each other" (Haynes 2024, 36). Nearly one-third of Zambians have expressed concerns about "Christian extremism," although what that term means is not always clear (Haynes 2024, 36).

Within this context, some Zambians propose that the introduction of Chinese Buddhism could serve as a counterbalance to religious extremism, promoting greater religious diversity and tolerance. As ZSCC also serves as a site for religious education, some Zambians, especially educators, believe its operation could improve the state of religious education in the country, which has traditionally focused on Christian teachings rather than on broader religious education.

However, in a predominantly Christian society, Chinese religious and cultural practices have raised concerns. Some speculate that the presence of Shaolin is intended to influence Zambians to abandon their cultural values in favor of a Chinese lifestyle. There are also concerns that the presence and operation of the Shaolin may conflict with Zambia's status as a Christian nation (Spring24 TV 2022). For example, a Lusaka resident living near ZSCC expressed discomfort: "Zambia is a Christian nation. The temple with its superstition and ancient gods is at variance with our Christian beliefs. Its presence is bigger than our churches, it makes us uncomfortable."¹⁶

The African staff at ZSCC have been proactive in addressing these concerns and criticisms. Yollando and Mwale, in particular, actively engage with the

Zambian media and those who question the legitimacy of the center. Instead of emphasizing the religious aspect, which might be sensitive, they concentrate their messaging on cultural exchanges and youth development. Yollando, for instance, has repeatedly clarified that ZSCC was not established to interfere with religions in Zambia, but to enable students to discover their talents through kung fu and Chinese culture. In a TV interview, Yollando stated, “We are not here to change their religion; we are here to help them find their own talents and ensure those talents are best developed” (Spring24 TV 2022). Mwale emphasized the value of unity and peaceful coexistence, quoting Zambia’s founding father Kenneth Kaunda’s motto: “One Zambia, one nation.” Mwale and Yollando also advised their Chinese colleagues to engage more actively with other religious groups in Zambia to foster mutual respect and interfaith understanding. They reached out to Zambian media outlets and Christian communities from different denominations, including major church bodies (e.g., the Christian Council of Zambia). They also made efforts to engage with Muslim societies and Hindu communities, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and “harmonious coexistence.”¹⁷

Regarding ZSCC’s religious education, Yanlun emphasizes that it is “important not to impose religious worldview on Zambian children,” and that ZSCC has not been imposing Buddhism on them. According to Yanlun, children at the center have the freedom to engage with Christianity or other Zambian religions. Yanlun explains: “Many of these children were raised in Christian households before here, we do not expect them to fully embrace Buddhist culture, they can choose whatever they prefer.” At the same time, ZSCC also serves as a site for learning about Buddhist teachings. Some of the children, who are more advanced Mandarin speakers, have begun to study Buddhist literature, such as the “Diamond Sutra” and the “Shurangama Sutra.”

In China, Shaolin rarely interacts with other religious groups. This is because all religious activities, including interfaith collaboration, are tightly regulated by various state organs, which discourages interreligious collaboration as it could be perceived as politically sensitive or potentially threatening to the Chinese Communist Party’s authority and influence (Johnson 2017). Conversely, its Zambian branch has organized more interfaith interaction activities at both individual and institutional levels. For instance, during Abbot Shi Yongxin’s first visit to Zambia, he held meetings with several national religious leaders and representatives from various religious organizations. According to Yanlun, ZSCC has been actively engaging with various religious organizations in Zambia and beyond.¹⁸ This demonstrates Shaolin’s more open and collaborative approach as it tries to expand its influence in Africa.

ZSCC as a charitable and educational site

A key feature of ZSCC is that, beyond its cultural and religious functions, it also serves as a charitable and educational site—something that was not initially planned. As mentioned above, the center currently takes care of around thirty children, most of them aged between three and ten. The majority of the children

belong to single-mother households with low incomes; some are orphans who resided with relatives. When some of these relatives first heard about a Chinese Buddhist temple being built in Lusaka, some visited the temple hoping the monks could raise the children. Master Yanlun explained that as ZSCC became better known, more guardians in similar situations wanted to send their children to the center, but the center currently does not have the capacity to take additional children.

With the increasing number of children residing at the center, ZSCC realized that it had to take on educational responsibilities; hence, it registered for a primary school license. It hired two Zambian teachers to teach the national curriculum, offering subjects such as English, science, technology, and mathematics, among others. Table 1 shows the ZSCC's timetable for teaching the Zambian curriculum at the primary school level.

Alongside the Zambian curriculum, the education of the children at ZSCC also incorporates the unique characteristics of Shaolin elements. The children and the Masters at ZSCC follow the same routine: the Shaolin Temple morning bell rings every day at 5:00 a.m. The masters and children then get up and prepare for morning prayers at 5:30 a.m. Breakfast is served at 6:30 a.m. From 7:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m., Zambian teachers conduct classes based on the Zambian curriculum. At 9:30, the children begin kung fu training. Around 12:00, they have lunch. From 12:30 to 2:30 p.m., they continue with lessons following the Zambian curriculum. At 2:30 p.m. there is another kung fu training session, although compared to the morning session, it is less strict and looks more like a physical education class. At 4:30 p.m., it is time for evening prayer, followed by dinner at 5:30 p.m. At 7:30 p.m. it is time for Chinese language classes. The Chinese language classes are taught by both Chinese and African staff at ZSCC. At 9:00 p.m., the evening drum sounds, signaling that it is time to prepare for bed. By 9:30 p.m., all the children are in bed. In addition, they also have music classes occasionally. The children

Table 1. ZSCC's teaching timetable (Zambian curriculum). Source: Shared by Master Yankun via WeChat, June 2025 (published with Master Yankun's consent)

SHAOLIN TEMPLE SCHOOL				
SECONDARY (FORM 1) TEACHING TIMETABLE - 2025				
DAY	07:30 08:30	08:30 09:30	09:30 12:30	12:30 14:30
Tuesday	English Language	Biology	B	Civic Education
Wednesday	Mathematics	Chemistry	R	ICT
Thursday	Biology	Physics	E	English Language
Friday	Chemistry	ICT	A	Mathematics
Saturday	Physics	Civic Education	K	English Language
PATHWAY: Natural Science (STEM)				
SUBJECT GROUPING: English Language, Mathematics, Civic Education, Biology, Chemistry, Physics and ICT				

have learned Chinese folk and popular songs, as well as some Zambian songs, which they sometimes perform during events.¹⁹

As an educational site, the center actively engages with Zambian educational bodies. For example, several Lusaka-based schools and universities, including the American International School of Lusaka, the Chinese International School in Zambia, and the University of Zambia, have invited the center to showcase kung fu for their students. Additionally, some Zambian schools have also organized visits for their students to the center.²⁰ In 2024, during the International Day of the Girl Child, children at ZSCC were invited to give a performance. According to an official from the Ministry of Education, ZSCC was invited to showcase the talents and discipline of the children. The official explained:

One of the biggest challenges in Zambia is that many parents do not understand the process of how to improve children's discipline. When children want to learn something but it becomes difficult, parents allow them to quit. Children at Shaolin (ZSCC) are not like that. By inviting them to give a performance, they also teach others how to be disciplined in order to become talented ... Also, I noticed previously that there are girls at Shaolin (ZSCC). I think, as our theme this year is Girls' Vision for the Future, it is also inspiring to see girls perform kung fu, and perform well.²¹

In China, Shaolin usually does not engage with schools or universities, as the Chinese government enforces strict regulations on religious activities outside of designated places of worship. The operation of ZSCC in Zambia is different. Due to relatively relaxed regulations in Zambia, ZSCC frequently performs outside its space, which has provided them with more opportunities to engage with Zambian society. Notably, some Zambian educational institutions view the activities conducted by ZSCC, particularly the kung fu performances by its children, as reflecting discipline and dedication, qualities that they encourage Zambian children to cultivate.

As described above, ZSCC operates as a multifunctional space where cultural, charitable, educational, and religious activities are not discrete but intersect and reinforce one another. For instance, in its educational function, the children residing at the center are not only students but inhabitants of a religious and aesthetic environment. Their artistic expressions and practice, for instance, include drawing Buddhist statues, through which the children also cultivate a personal understanding of the Dharma. Their everyday environment naturally shapes their creative expressions. The center's cultural and religious dimensions, as well as educational and charitable functions, are continuously reinforced through lived learning experience and creative practice. Moreover, both nonhuman (e.g., languages, transcultural education, the fusion of culinary traditions, the practice of kung fu) and human elements have contributed to "assembling." It shows that Shaolin's presence in Zambia is not merely a transmission of its Buddhist ideas and practices. Rather, it has evolved into a more adaptable form, allowing for mutual influence. Local Zambian cultural and religious elements, in particular, have played an active role in shaping such dynamics and are integrated alongside Shaolin traditions.

Assembling ZSCC: Co-formations between Chinese and Zambian actants

Beyond viewing the operation of ZSCC as the creation of a multifunctional site, it can also be understood as a process of co-formation between Chinese and Zambian actants, which involves a constellation of various actors (state and nonstate) and elements (human and nonhuman), each contributing in distinct ways to the center's emergence and operation. The relationship between Chinese religious organizations and the Chinese state is often referred to as "both unity and struggle" (*ji lianhe you douzheng* 既联合又斗争), a characteristic of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) united front efforts (Brook 2009; Wu, Tsai and Wang 2025). While Beijing, or Henan province, as well as the Chinese embassy in Zambia, provide a certain level of support to Shaolin or ZSCC (e.g., connecting ZSCC with the Zambian president's office), it is also important to consider the role of state oversight and regulation as Shaolin's internationalization also frequently encounters domestic policy and regulatory barriers due to its religious nature. These mechanisms can challenge Shaolin's internationalization, as the temple "may gain sufficient ideological and discursive power," which could be perceived as a threat to CCP's rule, influence, and legitimacy (Wu, Tsai and Wang 2025). For example, former Abbot Shi Yongxin mentioned that his international cultural dissemination activities require multilayered domestic approvals. The process begins with seeking consent from the local Bureau of Religious and Ethnic Affairs in Dengfeng City and continues through various bureaucratic layers, including the Dengfeng City Foreign Affairs Office, the Henan Province Foreign Affairs Office, and the National Religious Affairs Bureau. His travel plans had to adhere strictly to the itinerary reported to Beijing, with little flexibility.²²

In addition, as the Chinese government imposes strict controls on the transfer of assets by domestic religious institutions to foreign entities, Shaolin is not permitted to transfer its domestic financial resources abroad.²³ Yanlun described Shaolin's presence in Africa as being akin to "an abandoned child overseas,"²⁴ reliant solely on self-driven efforts for cultural dissemination.

Operating overseas, the Chinese embassy in Zambia has taken a more supportive stance as Chinese diplomats stationed in Zambia consider ZSCC as a potential instrument of soft power.²⁵ During Shi Yongxin's visit, the Chinese ambassador to Zambia hosted a formal meeting to welcome the then Abbot. The embassy also connected ZSCC with the Zambian president's office. Such diplomatic support stands in contrast to more reserved or cautious approaches seen elsewhere in Africa. For example, Master Xianhong of Tanhua Temple in Dar es Salaam noted that the Chinese Embassy in Tanzania distanced itself from the temple due to a scandal involving Master Xuecheng and Chinese diplomats' perception that the Longquan Temple is not an "orthodox representation of Buddhism."²⁶

The process of assembling ZSCC also depends heavily on its embeddedness within the Zambian regulatory and institutional landscape. The center has strategically cultivated relationships with key Zambian government departments, including the offices of the president and vice president, along with various ministries. One of ZSCC's strategies for fostering positive relations with

Zambian government bodies and officials has been cultural outreach, particularly through kung fu performances. For instance, during Zambia's annual agricultural exhibition in August 2023, children and the African warrior monks from ZSCC gave a kung fu performance in front of the vice president of Zambia. The following day, the permanent secretary of the vice president's office visited the center to extend an invitation for ZSCC to participate in Zambia's national religious conference. During this visit, the permanent secretary emphasized that while Zambia's predominant faith is Christianity, the country takes pride in its remarkable religious tolerance. He suggested that with Shaolin's presence in Zambia, Buddhism should be integrated into Zambian religious belief system.²⁷

Establishing the legal foundation for ZSCC required navigating several layers of Zambian bureaucracy. Initially, ZSCC registered as a private company limited by guarantee through the Patents and Companies Registration Agency (PACRA), a statutory body under the Ministry of Commerce, Trade, and Industry. Later, it also registered the Shaolin Association Africa as a nongovernmental organization (NGO) under relevant legislation. The Ministry of Home Affairs also approved the registration of Shaolin Temple Zambia under the provisions of the Societies Act.

In addition to their regulatory role, Zambian government bodies have also actively supported the development of ZSCC. For instance, in October 2024, the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, and the Ministry of Youth, Sport, and Arts visited the center and organized a donation for its children. The event was part of border corporate social responsibility initiatives led by Zambian companies and underscored the Zambian government's support for ZSCC. The frequent exchanges between Zambian government bodies and ZSCC highlight that, for the Zambian government, ZSCC is more than just a religious site; it is also a charitable, educational, and cultural institution that deserves government recognition and support. Moreover, when children of ZSCC returned from China for the Shaolin games competition, staff from the Zambian president's office welcomed them at Lusaka airport, a symbolic moment illustrating an *affective* assemblage of pride, national symbolism, and relational bonds.

The interplay of multiple actors, including Chinese diplomats, Zambian bureaucrats, religious personnel, and local communities shows that meaning and legitimacy around ZSCC are co-created through negotiation and adaptation, even as each actor engages the center with different intentions and rationalities. ZSCC should thus be understood as an evolving material, elemental, and affective assemblage, which involves a complex network of transnational enterprises, connections, infrastructures, and relation-building efforts (especially through the "African Trainees Program"), continually shaped by a variety of actors, human and nonhuman elements, and varying degrees of agency.

Discussion and conclusion

As discussed above, although Shaolin has some connections with the Chinese government (especially at the provincial level), the Chinese embassy, the local

Chinese community, and entrepreneurs in Zambia, it is evident that Shaolin's operation in Zambia demonstrates a more independent identity and a greater degree of operational freedom within the framework of local laws and regulations. While maintaining commonalities with its headquarters in China, ZSCC develops distinct characteristics shaped by the local context. Operating in Zambia, Shaolin adopts a highly localized approach that differs significantly from its operations in Henan. In Lusaka, there is far more engagement with local communities, corporations, educational and religious organizations, and various government departments in Zambia. This high level of local interaction and adaptation illustrates that ZSCC's activities in Zambia are not merely transplanted from China, but are instead co-produced and shaped by Zambian actors, agency, initiatives, and local conditions. ZSCC has thus partially Africanized, embedding it within the Zambian socio-cultural and religious landscape while maintaining some of its key Chinese characteristics.

Inspired by assemblage thinking, I argue that the operation of ZSCC should be viewed as a collaborative effort involving multiple stakeholders and elements—both within and beyond China—rather than as a monolithic or top-down project. ZSCC can be understood as an evolving assemblage, involving a multiplicity of transnational enterprises, connections and cultures that are continually shaped by diverse actors. Each of them engages with ZSCC through their own rationalities and collectively contributes to the co-creation of its meanings and practices. In such assemblages, not all elements possess equal power or efficacy. In the process of “assembling” Shaolin in Zambia, while both African and Chinese actors and institutions contribute to the assemblage, their roles and capacities may differ. The Chinese monks, for instance, may hold more symbolic power due to their association with the Shaolin brand, while African warrior monks also demonstrate their agency as well as their greater capacity to communicate with Zambian society and nurture the next generation of Shaolin kung fu practitioners. Other Zambian stakeholders, including officials and bureaucrats and other religious followers, also exert influence through regulation, oversight, guidance, cooperation, and resistance. The operation of ZSCC thus demonstrates the fluidity and adaptability of Shaolin as it transcends national, cultural, geographic, and religious boundaries while facing different and changing socio-environmental contexts. This also suggests the possibility of theoretically constructing a distinct religious and cultural identity when Chinese religion meets Africa.

Compared to the operation of CIs, which are typically state-funded and closely managed, ZSCC does not rely on state funding and operates with greater autonomy and flexibility and a longer-term vision rooted in cultural and spiritual commitment. Staff at CIs are often appointed for a fixed term of two to four years and their focus tends to center on executing tasks assigned by the Office of Chinese Language Council International (known as *Hanban*, 汉办) and their home institutions, with limited adaptation to the local context. In contrast, staff at ZSCC have a deeper motivation to manage and grow the center. Operating outside a rigid bureaucratic system also enables greater possibilities. These include possibilities to imagine alternative forms of Chinese cultural and religious engagement with Africa—approaches that are more bottom-up, less

bureaucratic, more relational, locally grounded, and with broader outreach and deeper engagement with the wider African population.

This article makes several contributions. First, it critiques the conventional view that Chinese Buddhism abroad primarily functions within diasporic Chinese communities. By providing empirical evidence of how ZSCC has been shaped by local actors, it argues that Shaolin's operations in Zambia have been partially Africanized, or at least to a certain extent, through adaptation, collaboration, and the active involvement of various Zambian or African actors or actants. Second, it challenges conventional assumptions that view the overseas expansion of Chinese religious institutions as primarily state-driven, particularly as part of China's broader soft power strategy and public diplomacy (Chung 2022). The case of ZSCC challenges this oversimplified, state-centric perspective as it reveals a more decentralized and adaptive model shaped by diverse actors. It highlights how Chinese religious traditions intersect with African cultural and religious landscapes, producing new, context-specific (re)configurations. Third it is precisely the fact that ZSCC represents more of a bottom-up approach, opening opportunities for stronger relational networks at the grassroots level and enabling African actors to exercise greater agency and play more active roles, which contrasts sharply with top-down initiatives such as CIs or Chinese's state-led media expansion in Africa. Fourth, the case of ZSCC also challenges methodological and analytical nationalism in studying Chinese cultural and religious engagement with the Global South, emphasizing the need for more nuanced, empirically grounded approaches in studying these transnational interactions.

With Shaolin launching more initiatives across Africa, future research can explore how various African actors in these countries interact with and influence Shaolin's and other Chinese Buddhist organizations' operations the long-term implications for the region's culture and religious ecologies, and how these developments may complicate African countries' religious policies and the management of religious activities.

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Notes

1. Personal communication with Shi Yongxin, Dengfeng, July 2023.
2. Multiple interviews with Shaolin's management, Dengfeng, July 2023.
3. Ibid.

4. Interview with Yanlun, Lusaka, August 2023.
5. Ibid.
6. Interview with staff from Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group, Lusaka, April 2019.
7. Gongde is often translated as “merit” or “virtue.”
8. Informal conversation with a Chinese businessperson in Zambia, Lusaka, August 2023.
9. Personal communication with Shi Yongxin, July 2023.
10. Multiple interviews with Chinese business and community leaders, Lusaka, August and December 2023.
11. Fieldwork observation, Lusaka, August, 2023.
12. Interview with the chairman, Lusaka, August 2023.
13. Interview with Yanlun, Lusaka, August 2023.
14. Multiple interviews with Chinese and African staff at ZSCC, Lusaka, August and December, 2023.
15. Interview with Yollando, Lusaka, August 2023.
16. Interview with a Lusaka citizen, Lusaka, December 2023.
17. Multiple interviews with staff at ZSCC, Lusaka, August 2023.
18. Interview with Yanlun, Lusaka, August 2023.
19. Author’s fieldwork notes, August 2023.
20. WeChat Observation from ZSCC’s WeChat video account, October 2023.
21. Interview with an anonymised official from the Ministry of Education, online interview, 21 October 2024.
22. Personal communication with Shi Yongxin, Dengfeng, July 2023.
23. Multiple interviews with Chinese officials and journalists, Beijing and Lusaka, July and August, 2023.
24. Interview with Yanlun, Lusaka, August 2023.
25. Interview with staff from the Chinese embassy in Zambia, Lusaka, August 2023.
26. Interview with Master Xianhong, Dar es Salaam, May 2023.
27. Author’s fieldwork notes, August 2023.

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