MONUMENTAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS

The Material Entextualization of Mutual Incomprehension in Sino-Mozambican Relations

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Abstract: A statue of stainless steel cast in China and placed at the entrance of the new National Stadium in Mozambique sparked controversy between Chinese donors and Mozambican recipients in the period leading up to the stadium's 2011 inauguration. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among the Mozambican and Chinese nationals involved in the project, we explore the multiple misunderstandings surrounding the statue and show how they came to define Sino-Mozambican relations. Entextualized through materiality, the misunderstandings assumed a monumental form in the statue, and the message of mutual incomprehension continued to reverberate across the social terrain of Sino-Mozambican relations long after the statue itself had been removed. Misunderstandings, we argue, should not be dismissed as ephemeral communicative glitches, but seen as productive events that structure social relations.

Keywords: China, entextualization, incomprehension, materiality, misunderstanding, Mozambique, National Stadium, sculpture

In 2005, the Chinese government proposed to donate a football stadium to Mozambique to be located in Zimpeto, a neighborhood on the northern periphery of Maputo, the country's capital. Less than six years later, on 23 April 2011, a new National Stadium with seating for 42,000 spectators was inaugurated by the Mozambican president, Armando Guebuza, and a delegation from the Chinese Embassy. In a 15-minute-long speech in fluent Portuguese, the Chinese ambassador praised the collaborative spirit pervading all phases of the construction process. "With efficiency and hard work," the ambassador shouted with more than a hint of the socialist jargon so familiar to most Mozambicans, "we

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have created a lasting monument to the eternal friendship between our two nations." At this point, the huge monitors at each end of the stadium suddenly went black and then displayed a beautiful screensaver of colorful interlaced flowers (see fig. 1). This sparked a great deal of mirth among the audience, and for a few minutes, until the problem was fixed, the spectators responded to every shift of the screensaver image with a rhythmical chant of "China!" that seemed more derisive than celebratory.

A football match between the national teams of Mozambique and Tanzania ensued, and it was the victory of Mozambique's Mambas that people discussed as they filed out of the stadium late in the evening. No one seemed to notice the empty pedestal in the floodlights at the entrance, and any mention of it had been studiously avoided by both Mozambican and Chinese participants during the inauguration ceremony. But it was here, this article argues, on the empty black marble pedestal in front of the National Stadium, that a series of productive misunderstandings between the Mozambican and Chinese collaborators first assumed a monumental form and then acquired the capacity to structure Sino-Mozambican relations along lines of mutual incomprehension.

In this article, we explore the production of mutual misunderstanding between Chinese and Mozambican interlocutors working on Mozambique's football (soccer) stadium, which was, at the time, one of the largest construction

Figure 1: The Chinese ambassador speaking during the inaugural ceremony at Mozambique's National Stadium. The photograph was taken at the precise moment when the projector system broke down and the monitors showed a screensaver image of colorful flowers. Photograph © Morten Nielsen

projects initiated in the sub-Saharan African nation-state since it acquired independence from Portugal in 1975. We focus in particular on the concrete and imagined physical materiality and how it came to shape the communicative realm constituted by the Chinese and Mozambican interlocutors collaborating around the building of the stadium. For, as we shall argue, it was through this materiality that certain crucial misunderstandings were transmitted and came to acquire efficacy across the social and cultural terrain occupied by Chinese and Mozambican interlocutors. Indeed, as the project advanced and eventually reached its completion, it was increasingly clear to both parties directly involved in the process—as well as to some outsiders, such as the authors of this article—that a number of social encounters both at and beyond the construction site (see fig. 2) were framed and often even motivated by a number of deeply confounding misunderstandings, whose capacity for imposing social distances seemed to emanate from the actual and imagined properties of material objects. In this article, we shall refer to this process, whereby a series of misunderstandings came to be enfolded in a localized material object and then radiated out to structure Sino-Mozambican collaboration, as 'entextualization through materiality'.

Within anthropology and cognate disciplines, cultural misunderstandings have conventionally been considered as an indication of communicative mistakes, errors, or failures (Bailey 2004; Beattie [1964] 2004; Fabian 1995; Ochs

Figure 2: The entrance to the construction site. Photograph © Morten Nielsen

1991). In his discussion on ethnographic comparisons, Beattie ([1964] 2004: x) thus argues:

> The greater the differences between the societies concerned, and the less complete the contact already established between them, the greater is the danger of serious misunderstanding. An important contribution of social anthropology has been to demonstrate that the social and cultural institutions of societies remote from our own must be understood, if they are to be understood at all, through the ideas and values current in those societies, and not simply in our own terms.

We share the general assumption that misunderstandings cannot be the end goal for any cultural analysis.[1] But in what follows we wish to pursue a different analytical trajectory where misunderstandings, rather than being ephemeral communicative mishaps, assume a lasting form and come to constitute an "exegetical opening" (Nevins 2010: 59; see also Basso 1979) to a nuanced examination of social processes that may be described as 'schismogenetic' (Bateson 1935). At the outset, we define misunderstanding quite broadly as a breakdown in communication that can be momentary and easily resolved or more durable with persistent and confounding effects. All communicative acts necessarily involve exchanges between different perspectives, which are never in complete alignment.[2] With Viveiros de Castro (2004), we could therefore argue that, irrespective of context and individual and collective positions (social, cultural, economic, political, etc.), communication is always a form of translation 'by differences'. In this regard, the analytical trajectory that we follow here offers a perspective of misunderstanding both as a breakdown of communication and as an intensification of differential communication wherein the communicators become conscious of this differential: misunderstanding as both occurrence and reflexivity, as it were. The ongoing exchange (i.e., dialogue understood in the broadest possible way) is rendered so problematic that it may be discontinued or might require other forms of relationality, such as reduced interactions, partial detachment, or complete separation, to be established for shorter or longer periods of time. As our collective research on Sino-Mozambican collaborations progressed, it seemed to us that certain forms of misunderstandings—momentary or permanent breakdowns of communication—were stabilized to the extent of structurally reproducing themselves. The question we began to ask ourselves, then, was whether and how misunderstandings might acquire some form of structural stability as a patterned social form with a particular generative force. This brings us to our main analytical notion of entextualization through materiality.

In linguistic anthropology, entextualization denotes the process by which certain speech acts are lifted out of an interactional setting in order to be treated as objects that transcend particular circumstances (Bauman and Briggs 1990;

Urban 1996; see also Keane 1995, 1997). According to Barbara Babcock, it is because of entextualization that a given speech act or text can be decoupled from its context without thereby automatically losing consistency and significance. At the heart of entextualization processes is thus the recursive capacity of any system of signification to "turn or bend upon itself, to become an object to itself, to refer to itself" (cited in Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73). This recursive or reflexive capacity is manifest most prominently in the so-called metalingual (or metadiscursive) function of linguistic systems, which allows for the objectification of a given speech act or text by virtue, so to speak, of making it its own topic.[3] Crucially for present purposes, processes of entextualization involve a mutation whereby detached elements from speech acts or texts undergo irreversible transformations. In order for a given speech act or text to acquire efficacy across different semiotic modalities, it is not just possible but *necessary* that certain such metadiscursive indicators are removed or underemphasized, while other and new ones are added. Works and texts become shareable precisely *because* they move between different social contexts and semiotic modalities and acquire new forms, without losing consistency and significance even though they do undergo irreversible transformations (cf. Gow 2001). And, following from this, in order for speech acts or texts to capture a given social situation, they require constant oscillation between what Keane (2005: 64) has coined "epistemologies of estrangement and of intimacy," that is, between the possibility for meaningful translation and absolute incomprehension.

Hence, irrespective of scale and magnitude, there is in any social interaction a potential or capacity for detachment or even generalization by which some social or cultural 'stuff' (words, beliefs, social norms, etc.) may come to transcend the limitations of its immediate actualization, but in a form that differs from its original context and hence has the capacity for carrying productive misunderstandings. In the Sino-Mozambican collaborations that we examine here, misunderstandings have gained social efficacy in different local milieus by being articulated through impressions, reflections, and discussions about a particular material form, namely, that of a stainless steel statue, which was originally placed at the entrance to the new stadium. As a communicative medium that was inherently ambiguous and redundant to the practical task of building a stadium, the statue was an unnecessary excess, and as a series of misunderstandings began to cluster around it, it gained a social efficacy that only seemed to intensify when the statue was finally removed. Not unlike the ceremonial wooden Malanggan burial figures, which need to disappear in order to gain social efficacy (Küchler 1987, 2002), the absence of the statue allowed for mutual misunderstandings to transcend the context of the statue itself and thereby prompted a series of broader communicative breakdowns that came to characterize the Sino-Mozambican relationship as such. As we shall soon see, as long as the statue remained in place, there was a chance that all the

accumulated misunderstandings might be cleared away as mere communicative glitches, but once it was gone, its absence—occasioned by interweaving miscommunications and misconstrued actions and intentions—allowed mutual incomprehension to structure an entire social terrain.

The discussion of monumental misunderstandings that follows is structured in terms of this overall progression. We begin by tracing the fraught events that preceded and followed the placing of the statue at the entrance of the stadium. As we will argue in the following section, the physicality of the statue kept the production of mutual misunderstandings in place by offering a particular and relatively limited semantic form—that of the statue itself. By then mapping the afterlife of the statue, we show how the eventual absence of the 'metal goddess' has given way to a reconfigured plural social terrain that is no longer tied to the semantic qualities of the statue. In the conclusion, we return to the overall discussion of entextualization through materiality in relation to the way that Sino-Mozambican misunderstandings have played themselves out in this particular instance.

A Glorious Monument to an Everlasting Friendship

Nielsen first approached the large football stadium that was under construction in Zimpeto on the outskirts of Maputo in 2009. As part of China's 'stadium diplomacy' (Will 2012), which has seen Chinese construction companies building sports venues financed by the Chinese state across the globe, the stadium was, at least initially, considered to be the epitome of friendly and mutually rewarding Sino-Mozambican collaboration by both Chinese informants and Mozambicans. Employing around 300 Chinese and 300 local workers, the construction project seemed like a perfect case study for an ongoing research project on Chinese globalization[4] that required two fieldworkers to conduct interviews with both Chinese and locals at the same sites.

The Chinese workers at the stadium lived and worked on the walled and guarded construction site. SOGECOA, a local subsidiary of Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group, the Chinese company in charge of the stadium,[5] supplied the Chinese workers with food, lodging, and identical purple uniforms, and thus they had little occasion to interact with local society. Some complained that it was boring to spend years on a construction site, but during his 2010 fieldwork, Bunkenborg found that the Chinese workers were generally quite satisfied with their predictable and relatively well-paid jobs. For the Mozambican workers hired by the Chinese company to do the manual labor at the construction site, the situation was not so ideal. As they told Nielsen during his many visits to the site, salaries varied with no reasons given by the Chinese employers to account for these fluctuations (Nielsen 2012b); national safety

regulations were not respected; and less than half of the workers had proper contracts signed by both the Chinese company and the Ministry of Labour as required by the national labor law (Labour Arbitration Center 2007).

Furthermore, the project was being audited by a Mozambican company notorious for its intimate ties with elite members of the governing Frelimo party—something that, according to many observers of Mozambican politics, seriously undermined its capacity to operate independently and thus secure the quality of the project.[6] Several local bricklayers and engineers had pointed out the poor quality of the cement imported from China, and judging from the cracks in the walls that were already visible during the inauguration, they were perhaps not entirely wrong. Equally disturbing—although somewhat more entertaining—was the problem with the weak metal structures supporting the plastic seats in the stadium. Nearly all of the seats in the VIP area collapsed during the opening ceremony, and now the media were having a ball showing wrecked plastic pieces scattered throughout the spacious aisles where the party elite had been sitting. "Our bosses are too fat," Nielsen's friend Fernando Sîtoe said with a deadpan expression. "The Chinese are all so small and boney. They only build chairs for themselves—not for us."

Without a doubt, to most of the Mozambican officials involved in the stadium project whom Nielsen interviewed, one of the most puzzling periods of the construction process began in the summer of 2009 when several huge wooden containers shipped from China by the construction consortium arrived at the Maputo harbor to be registered by the customs office. As several municipal and state officials involved in the project later told Nielsen, in order for the Chinese consortium to use its own building materials shipped from China, an initial approval from a special department at the Ministry of Sports that had been set up to coordinate all activities during the construction process was required. By so doing, the Ministry would (ideally) be able to thoroughly monitor the shipment of all construction materials from China. However, the large wooden containers that suddenly appeared at the Maputo harbor had not been previously registered at the Ministry of Sports, nor had the Chinese engineers at the construction site informed their Mozambican counterparts about the containers' arrival. Even more puzzling than the lacking documentation, however, was the question regarding the content of the wooden containers. According to the ministry officer present at the customs office when the first box was opened, it contained curved, stainless metal pieces, each one approximately two meters long, that were carefully stacked one on top of the other. "I knew immediately that it was certainly not something to be used by the engineers," the officer told Nielsen. "It looked more like something that belonged in a Chinese church, I suppose." Still, as the metal pieces appeared to constitute no threat or problem, the customs officers and ministry officials decided to resolve the matter swiftly: the wooden containers were formally registered and transported to the construction site.

During the following weeks, the mystery about the wooden containers was soon buried under the piles of immediate problems that continued to impede the construction process. Not least were the two strikes organized by the Mozambican workers to protest against the intolerable work conditions at the construction site and the unfair calculation of salaries, which resulted in several serious injuries and the killing of a worker when the strikes were eventually broken up by the military police (Machava 2009; Notícias 2009). It was only in early November that it was finally revealed—and in a very visible way—what the curved pieces of stainless metal were intended for. During the quiet summer period, a massive cement pedestal coated in black marble was erected in the middle of the huge square in front of the stadium building. At its front was placed a white marble plaque with a carefully written inscription in both Chinese and Portuguese that seemed to pre-empt the ambassador's speech by praising the eternal friendship between the two nations. And, on its top, spectators could marvel at the sight of a 10-meter-high statue that was without a doubt made of the pieces of curved stainless steel that the ministry official first saw at the Maputo harbor several weeks earlier.

Nielsen's fascination with the statue proved to be contagious, and Bunkenborg discovered that the Chinese called it the *Spirit of Eternity* (永恒的精神). Even if the eight arms suggested a superficial resemblance to representations of Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, the statue, produced by the Chinese sculptor Xu Xiaohong (徐晓虹), was intended to be an abstract and ornamental token of enduring friendship. Xu Xiaohong first visited Mozambique in 2003 to install a series of sculptures he had been commissioned to produce for the Chinese-built Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In a brief article on this adventure, Xu Xiaohong (2003: 56) notes how the central reliefs depicting muscular bodies engaged in hunting, herding, woodcarving, and dancing aim to "eulogize and express the Mozambican people's desire to live, their pursuit of life, how they ask for a beautiful future with kind and devout hearts, and how they hope to acquire supernatural power by appealing to ancestors and spirits." Not only does Xu Xiaohong claim to have sensed the essence of Mozambique by visiting "tribes" (部落) and talking to the "natives" (土著), he also emphasizes how much his art was appreciated by the Mozambicans. Praising his work in high tones, the ministry officials were quite astonished to learn that he had never actually been to Africa, and the general Mozambican public was equally excited. As Xu Xiaohong (2003: 57) related: "During this time, many black people came there, and they would start moving in imitation of the movements depicted by the sculptures and shouting happily. There was an emotional interaction between the spectators and the art, and it was a very moving scene." Describing his art as a conduit for mutual understanding and friendship, Xu Xiaohong concluded that "the sweat of hard work had irrigated the friendship between China and Mozambique. I made many Chinese and

Mozambican friends there, and the friendship between us was linked up through the artwork" (ibid.).

Xu Xiaohong (2003: 56) counted himself fortunate to have visited a continent so "mysterious, pure, passionate, and wild" and to have installed his artwork to stay "forever" in Mozambique. Describing the enthusiastic reception of his work and the way his vision of Mozambican alterity was mimetically appropriated and physically enacted by an enthusiastic Mozambican public (cf. Taussig 1993: 44–58), the sculptor clearly saw his art as a material medium for connections of friendship and deep mutual understanding. But even if Xu Xiaohong's work may have pleased the Mozambican public back in 2003, the sculpture he produced for the football stadium in 2009 most certainly did not. Rather than friendship and deep mutual understanding, the alien and possibly religious iconography of the sculpture suggested a complete misreading of Mozambican political aesthetics. As the sculptor came to realize, the statue was a catalyst for fundamental and divisive misunderstandings between the Mozambican and Chinese collaborators, with the result that, ironically, the *Spirit of Eternity* was to make but a brief appearance at the stadium.

Getting Rid of the 'Chinese Goddess'

"I could see right away that something was wrong!" Paulinho Coelho, a municipal architect and member of the National Steering Committee later told Nielsen. It was on one of the last days of Nielsen's 2009 stay when he finally sat down with Coelho in one of the many small liquor stalls located near the Faculty of Architecture in the center of Maputo to discuss the process of erecting and later removing the statue. Coelho continued: "I really have no idea what goes on inside their heads! Because we had never asked them to build that thing, you know. Never! But then again, that just proved to us what working with the Chinese is like. They nod at everything we say, but then, when it is time for action, they end up doing something altogether different and strange [*estranho*]. The Chinese … I tell you, they are a mystery [*mistério*] to me!" Judging from the blueprints and descriptions of the projected stadium site, Coelho was not completely off the mark when arguing that his Chinese interlocutors had diverged from the initial agreement. Evidently, the statue had not been mentioned in any official document before it was erected at the square in front of the stadium building. Coelho and his colleagues had of course questioned their Chinese counterparts about the statue, but to no avail. "They just don't want to communicate," Coelho sneered. "They know it's wrong, but they see Africa as their private playground and therefore seem to think that they can do whatever they want." Nielsen suggested to Coelho and several of his colleagues that a workable solution might be simply to incorporate the statue within the existing

plan based on its aesthetic or symbolic qualities, but this suggestion was flatly refused. In no way did the statue evoke national Mozambican symbolism or reverberate in meaningful ways with shared understandings of materiality and spirituality. According to the local officials whom Nielsen spoke to, the statue's in-your-face voluptuousness and goddess-like curves suggested something quite alien to Mozambican political cosmologies in the southern part of the country. "In Mozambique, we don't worship religious things like that," Coelho argued vehemently. "That is simply too much!"

So the statue had to be removed and preferably as soon as possible. Doing so, however, was not as easy and unproblematic as the Mozambican officials had first imagined. From the ministry's minutes, it appears that the statue was brought up at nearly every meeting with the Chinese engineers, but all kinds of problems arose that continued to postpone its removal.[7] As it turned out, several blueprints allegedly existed, and only the Chinese versions contained descriptions of the statue. Consequently, the Chinese engineers maintained that confirmation from the company's headquarters in China was required before a removal could be accepted. Needless to say, the Mozambican officials demanded to inspect the said blueprints, but realizing that everything was written in Chinese, the strategy soon reverted to one of polite political pressure and forceful argumentation. For many Mozambican officials, it was during the period of tense negotiations over the contested goddess-like statue that they realized what their Chinese counterparts were really up to. "It's all going to be China here," a municipal surveyor told Nielsen and Bunkenborg during a visit to the stadium. "They build walls around their construction sites, and when they open the doors again, it's all China with their statues and silly hats. This is exactly the stuff that we need to avoid, you know." Nevertheless, despite the explicitly stated demand of having the statue removed, for the next several months it remained at the square in front of the stadium building as a very physical reminder of the fraught relationships between Chinese engineers and Mozambican officials.

Amid the rising tension about the 'Chinese Goddess', Xu Xiaohong visited Mozambique to oversee the installation of his works at the stadium, and according to a biographical piece that Bunkenborg uncovered, the Chinese sculptor made a narrow escape from Maputo. Entitled "The Way of a Master" (2017), the article by Wu Xianfei (伍先飞) describes how Xu Xiaohong heard rumors of an impending general strike in Maputo but nevertheless insisted on visiting the construction site on 1 September 2010. Xu Xiaohong was then surprised to see that "none of the workers on the construction site were working. Instead, they were arguing in small groups about something that Xu Xiaohong didn't understand. When the workers saw him, they weren't cordial as they used to be, and the expression in their eyes seemed different" (ibid.). Xu Xiaohong then noticed that there was thick, dark smoke rising in the vicinity, and suddenly the

sound of gunfire and explosions around the stadium made the workers throw down their tools and rush out "as if they had taken stimulants" (ibid.). Making his way to the top of the stadium through smoke and tear gas, Xu Xiaohong looked out on a city where demonstrators and police clashed around numerous improvised roadblocks made from burning vehicles and felled trees. Counting himself lucky that the stadium was walled and fenced and that the police were still guarding the gate, he stayed there until nightfall.

In the evening, the Chinese Embassy persuaded the Mozambican police to escort Xu Xiaohong to the airport. At first, the police sent two officers with a car, but having picked up the sculptor, they abandoned the attempt to reach the airport after a few kilometers and returned to the stadium. The police were then persuaded to send heavily armed reinforcements, and on the second attempt, Xu Xiaohong set out with three cars and 12 officers. Threading their way through roadblocks and burning vehicles in a city without electricity, the cars were rocked by firebombs and peppered with bullets along the way. After four hours, they reached the airport unscathed, and the Chinese sculptor made his escape. In the biography of Xu Xiaohong, the general strike in Maputo is described almost as a full-blown civil war, and surprisingly, the *Spirit of Eternity* takes no small part of the blame for the sudden eruption of chaos in Mozambique:

> After his return, Xu Xiaohong learned that in addition to factors internal to Mozambique, one of the important reasons behind the riots might well be that the opposition party in Mozambique was extremely displeased that a giant statue in front of the National Stadium was made by a Chinese. They claimed that the statue was a hidden Chinese cultural influence that eroded their culture. Even if Xu Xiaohong's work wasn't the direct cause, it was certainly one of them. (Wu Xianfei 2017)

Despite the general strike, the statue was still in place when the date for the delivery of the project to the Mozambican government was drawing near in 2011, and the local officials were increasingly frustrated. "We had to get rid of it," Paulinho Coelho, the municipal architect, explained to Nielsen. "Imagine the president having to go past a Chinese goddess on the inauguration night. He could just as well hand over his country to the Chinese ambassador!" In March 2011, the Chinese construction consortium officially delivered the project to the Mozambican government. A small ceremonial reception was held in the VIP lounge for a group of high-ranking Mozambican state officials and a delegation from the Chinese construction consortium responsible for the building project, after which everyone went on an inspection tour to evaluate the stadium. When the group entered the square in front of the new stadium building, they were met by the impressive sight of the 10-meter-high metal statue still gracing the entrance area. Having realized that they would not be capable of forcing their Chinese counterparts to do anything about the problem, the Mozambican

officials decided that they would wait until the project was formally handed over to them and then quickly remove both statue and pedestal. The date for the inauguration of the stadium was set for 23 April, so there was probably still time to remove all traces of what many of the Mozambican officials whom Nielsen had interviewed took to be a Chinese goddess.

Indeed, not long after the ceremonial delivery of the project, Mozambican workers quickly removed the metal statue and began to take down the black marble covering the pedestal, only to realize that its base was made of rock-hard cement. Two options were then considered: either to use heavy equipment to tear the base apart and thereby probably also destroy parts of the surrounding square that had been carefully covered by flagstones or simply to leave the pedestal as it was. As can be seen from the media coverage of the inauguration ceremony (and to this day by anyone visiting the stadium), the engineers chose the latter option. Although the original marble plaque was replaced with a new one stating the inauguration date (see fig. 3), when Nielsen last visited the stadium building in the fall of 2019, the pedestal still stood at the entrance with the virtual traces of the metal statue hovering above it.

Figure 3: The statue-less pedestal that still graces the entrance to the football stadium. The plaque announces that the National Stadium was inaugurated by President Guebuza and makes no reference to China. Photograph © Morten Nielsen

The Transportability of Mutual Misunderstandings

The tragicomic tale of the erection and subsequent removal of the *Spirit of Eternity* from the square in front of the stadium in Maputo is not just a very concrete zone of "awkward engagement" in Anna Tsing's (2005: xi) terms, but also an apt illustration of the relational repercussions of the series of mutual misunderstandings that came to characterize the often fraught collaborations between Chinese and local Mozambican interlocutors during the period of Nielsen's and Bunkenborg's ethnographic research. For it was precisely through the process of entextualization instantiated through the initially very present and, subsequently, physically absent goddess-like statue that different protagonists came to figure one another as irreducibly enigmatic, which required a certain social distance. The mutual misunderstandings between Chinese and Mozambican interlocutors took center stage and could no longer be ignored as merely a 'dark side' to an otherwise successful communicative process.

As described at the outset of this article, according to semiotic theory, conventional speech acts or texts become entextualized via ongoing transformations of their content, which appears durable and shared, "independent of particular realizations such as readings, interpretations, or performances or their historical transformation" (Keane 1997: 64). In terms of the entextualization of mutual misunderstandings, then, it is relevant to consider the "transportability" (ibid.) of certain features of speech acts, interactions, and events so that they come to be treated as communicative objects capable of transcending their particular circumstances.

Returning to Xu Xiaohong's troubling experiences in Maputo, the popular uprising of 1–2 September 2010 actually had little or nothing to do with the *Spirit of Eternity*. For two days, several major Mozambican cities were converted into popular battlefields as huge crowds of frustrated and angry urbanites captured main urban spaces, "burning heaps of tyres as barricades on main roads" and looting "shops and warehouses" (Bertelsen 2016: 28; see also Buur 2015). The immediate reason for the popular uprisings was an increase in fuel and bread prices, but the event was, equally importantly, a moment of almost carnivalesque effervescence, where dispossessed urbanites experimented with new forms of political subjectivities and ideological imageries (Bertelsen 2016). Xu Xiaohong and his biographer obviously made the most of these dramatic events, but the sudden plunge into darkness and anarchy was no doubt a real shock to the sculptor. To the extent that he interpreted the strikes as a protest against his statue, the frightening drive through the burning streets of Maputo must have seemed like a surreal ride through the chaotic effects of his own artistic vision.

Xu Xiaohong got it wrong by assuming that his statue was a major cause of the uprisings, but what is more interesting than the addition of yet another layer

of misunderstandings is the sculptor's realization that he might be misunderstanding Mozambique and that he himself was being misunderstood. His biographer describes how Xu Xiaohong "invested all his enthusiasm for the African people in the sculptures and made them express completely the mentality of the Mozambicans in a way that was deeply appreciated by the Mozambican President" (Wu Xianfei 2017). When the sculptor was warned of an impending strike on the eve of the uprising, he refused to believe that there could be any discontent beneath the lively and peaceful activity at the construction site. Yet this easy confidence in his own ability to understand and represent Mozambique through his art disappeared when he fled the country. Upon his return to the "firm and warm soil of the motherland," he wrote President Guebuza a letter to explain his sculptural art (ibid.). As an intensification of differential communication, the riots in Maputo evidently caused Xu Xiaohong to abandon his initial idea of a seamless communication mediated by his artwork and made him conscious of a difference that rendered communication all but impossible. Only a translation by the president himself, Xu Xiaohong's letter suggests, could possibly bring the artist and the Mozambican public to an understanding.

It was almost at the same time that the Chinese artist drove through a Mozambican capital on the verge of collapse that Paulinho Coelho and his colleagues were finally losing all patience with their Chinese interlocutors. "I really have no fuckin' clue what is going on, but something is definitively not right with them [*algo não bate bem com eles*]," Coelho snapped. "Why won't they try to understand what's going on here?" To Coelho and several other Mozambican officials, the Chinese engineers and representatives were apparently not seeking to establish amicable relationships with their local hosts. In fact, the refusal to remove the statue was yet another confirmation of their mysterious aloofness. And even if the Chinese engineers were deliberately not engaging in local negotiations based on a strategy of making Mozambique 'all China'—as the municipal surveyor told Nielsen and Bunkenborg during a visit to the stadium—the idea of a strangely incomprehensible Chinese arrogance soon became a central affective driver for the Mozambicans during daily encounters with their Asian counterparts. As Tirso Nhone, a young, energetic official from the Ministry of Sports told Nielsen: "We were wasting our time with the Chinese … The statue was just a way for them to show that they were controlling everything here [*que eles mandaram tudo aqui*] … But what is the purpose? I mean, they don't really seem to want to have anything to do with us anyway. It's a mystery [*é um mistério*] to me."

During the period when the statue was still gracing the entrance to the stadium, the Sino-Mozambican misunderstandings were becoming a key vehicle for framing, negotiating, and often even motivating social life at the construction site (cf. Bailey 2004). The misunderstandings ranged from the Mozambican officials' puzzlement about why their Chinese collaborators insisted on

placing the statue in front of the stadium to begin with, and why they subsequently refused to take it down, to the Chinese engineers' bewilderment about the Mozambicans' refusal to accept the statue as a gift of eternal friendship and Xu Xiaohong's interpretation of the popular uprising. Here, the efficacy of the material form of the statue seemed to derive from the fact that it captured different social imageries and allowed (mis)understandings to pass through it, albeit in mutated forms, like when the contested statue, from Xu Xiaohong's perspective, activated a local political (relational) universe structured around varying degrees of opposition to an alleged cultural influence from China. In this regard, the physicality of the statue enabled a form of entextualization that pivoted around itself. Mutual misunderstandings were given form by the particular semantic qualities of the statue, which reverberated through a relatively fixed set of relations. The Mozambican officials' bewilderment about why their Chinese interlocutors refused to remove the statue and why they would not give a reasonable explanation for this refusal increased, while at the same time the Chinese engineers and Xu Xiaohong were deeply puzzled about the Mozambicans' lack of excitement for their project. In both instances, we would argue, the statue became a transportable semantic modality that activated and framed overlapping sets of social practices around a series of mutual misunderstandings.

As we shall now see, however, the misunderstandings did not disappear along with the statue. Rather, the absence of the statue appears to have liberated the misunderstandings from the physicality of the statue and opened toward an altered plural social terrain in which the relationship between Chinese and Mozambican interlocutors was configured in terms of different hierarchies of power.

The Efficacious Afterlife of Statues

Attempting to work out what happened to the statue after it was removed from the square in front of the National Stadium, Nielsen and Bunkenborg asked around quite a lot and ended up going on more than a few wild goose chases before they identified its subsequent trajectory and final resting place. Most of Bunkenborg's informants claimed that they had not even heard of the statue, the construction company declined to comment upon the matter, and at the Chinese consular office a junior employee tittered with embarrassment but refused to say anything except that there had been "some sort of misunderstanding" (某种误解) about the statue. An official at the Ministry of Sports suggested to Bunkenborg that he should pay a visit to the National Museum of Arts, where he believed it to be stored in the basement. Bunkenborg managed to persuade the museum guard to show him the basement, and it turned out

that there really was a Chinese statue in the basement. It was not the *Spirit of Eternity*, however, but a beautifully carved wooden statue of the deity Guangong (关公), which was moved into the basement when a building owned by the Chinese Association in Maputo was nationalized in 1975. While Bunkenborg was sidetracked researching this other statue, Nielsen decided to visit the museum on his own. On this occasion, the guard suddenly remembered having seen "a huge metal thing" being offloaded in the backyard of the museum some time during the early months of 2011 and suggested that Nielsen might go there and take a look. Besides serving as a workshop for a group of young craft workers, the backyard was also used as provisional storage space for old museum items before they were sent off to one of the local refuse dumps. After a quick inspection, Nielsen and the guard came to the conclusion that the statue was not in the backyard after all, so they decided to check the huge and wildly growing garden behind the museum building as well. And there it was! Lying on its back and almost hidden behind a row of thorny bushes was the 10-meter-high Chinese statue in stainless steel (see fig. 4). While neither guard nor museum inspectors had known anything about the history of the statue, they had decided that it would be too costly (and troublesome) to ship

Figure 4: The statue in the garden behind Mozambique's National Museum of Arts. Photograph © Morten Nielsen

it to the refuse dump, so it had instead been unceremoniously dumped in the museum's back garden. And so it was that the *Spirit of Eternity*, known to the puzzled Mozambican state agents as the Chinese Goddess when it briefly graced the entrance to Mozambique's National Stadium, was ignominiously discarded behind the National Museum of Arts.

While the statue of Guangong was returned to the premises of the Chinese Association in the spring of 2018, the *Spirit of Eternity* still lies as a fallen giant in the back garden, and it remains to be seen whether it will be there indefinitely. Meanwhile, the very absence of the statue would appear to exert its own form of efficacy. As an iconic form of contentious materiality that anchored an accumulation of Sino-Mozambican misunderstandings, its removal did not resolve those misunderstandings, but instead opened toward a plural social universe where Sino-Mozambican political hierarchies appeared both fundamentally separate (to many Chinese interlocutors) and at the same time intimately intertwined (to many Mozambican interlocutors).

A Changed Social Terrain of Mutual Misunderstandings

The process of erecting and later removing the statue wedged into the Sino-Mozambican relationship an acute awareness of the fundamental differences in beliefs about symbolism and religion that simply could not be overcome. Although the stainless steel from which the statue was assembled was later removed, a strange hovering presence was left behind atop the black pedestal. In a sense, the space previously occupied by the *Spirit of Eternity* statue now constitutes what might best be described as a 'virtual stage' for playing out new and paradoxical encounters with alterity. On the Chinese side, the absence of the statue seemed to constitute an inexplicable embarrassment that needed to be avoided. Consequently, the sculptor failed to mention that his statue was removed almost immediately, and he continues to this day to display images on his website of the statue while it was still in place. On the Mozambican side, the absent statue soon appeared to be stimulating new political imaginaries.

During a research trip to Maputo in 2012, Nielsen met up with Sérgio, a municipal surveyor who had been involved in the construction project since the very beginning. Everything in his small, damp office looked exactly the same as during Nielsen's earlier visits except for one thing. At the table positioned next to his derelict computer monitor, Sergio had placed a small framed photograph taken while Armando Guebuza, the Mozambican president, was reading the inscription on the marble plaque placed at the front of the pedestal. Nielsen nodded toward the photograph and must have looked quite bewildered as Sérgio immediately picked up the photograph with a grin on his face. "Yeah, our president is making *ku phahla* in honor of his Chinese ancestors … Didn't you see

it?" In xiChangana, the Bantu language widely spoken in the southern part of Mozambique, *ku phahla* connotes the yearly commemorative ritual that is generally carried out by traditional leaders and diviners in honor of those deceased ancestors who are still guiding the lives of the living (Honwana 1996; Nielsen 2012a; Nielsen and Bunkenborg 2020). Oftentimes, when the president visits important national sites, he commemorates local ancestral spirits by making a *ku phahla* ceremony with local leaders. According to Sérgio's interpretation, then, rather than merely reading the inscription, the Mozambican president was honoring the now immaterial Chinese goddess, which almost seemed to acquire the status of an interior spiritual force. A few days later, Nielsen described to Paulinho Coelho what Sérgio had suggested. Coelho roared with laughter. "Yeah, man! Guebuza is our Chinese president, that's for sure. Didn't you also hear the Chinese ambassador?" Coelho continued. "His Portuguese was better than my mother's. Well, that's just strange. Now people are saying that Guebuza also speaks Chinese … I mean … What is going on [*o que passa*]?"

The thick irony aside, what was probably most revealing about the officials' reactions was their playful experimentation with new configurations of Mozambican subjectivities. With the removal of the metal goddess, the material index of an 'eternal friendship', which was probably never there in the first place, was both physically and, indeed, figuratively 'obviated' (Nielsen 2012b; Wagner 1979). The vacant space atop the massive pedestal where the statue was supposed to stand now seemed to function almost like a virtual stage upon which otherness could be tried out for size without having to engage in or distance oneself from potentially detrimental social relationships with the evermore inexplicable Chinese engineers (Taussig 1993: 33). To Mozambican officials such as Paulinho Coelho, the "absence of presence" (Frers 2013: 431) of the statue was a constant reminder that their Asian counterparts were fundamentally 'strange' and 'mysterious' and therefore any attempt at figuring them out would be futile. But at the same time, the strangeness of the Chinese engineers was also what made it possible for the Mozambican officials to imagine alternative scenarios where the relationship between the otherwise detached Mozambican and Chinese interlocutors could be used as a catalyst for tweaking one's own social and political position. Indeed, to paraphrase Sérgio, how else could the Mozambican president have managed to learn to speak Chinese fluently with little or no knowledge of the language?

Since independence, Frelimo leaders have been seen in terms of a nationalist 'liberation script', which continues to confer legitimacy to the ruling party based on an all-encompassing narrative of its victorious and revolutionary liberation of the country in 1975 (Coelho 2013; see also Dinerman 2006). According to this dominant nationalist narrative, political leaders such as Armando Guebuza could move through history seemingly undeterred by the gradual collapse of the socialist project because of their unassailable status as

revolutionary warriors. João Paulo Borges Coelho (2013: 23) argues that "the Liberation Script … distinguished the revolutionary from the common subject—in other words—the one that had participated in the liberation struggle from the one holding merely a colonial experience." Hence, if Guebuza, who was part of the revolutionary movement and later political party that had allegedly liberated Mozambique from its colonial oppressors, suddenly bowed to a Chinese goddess, this completely upended the nationalist ideological universe. To be sure, it was not possible for Sérgio to make a definitive interpretation of the photograph, which showed the president bending his torso slightly forward in order to read the inscription on the marble plaque that was placed at the front of the pedestal. But that was also the point! Even the playful suggestion that a national political hero would stage symbolic subjugation to a 'strange' Chinese cosmological figure was an indication that the balance of dominant political powers had shifted, irrespective of the fact that this change in perspective was most likely based on an erroneous interpretation of what the Chinese strategy for making the statue actually was. In any case, the outcome was that the national political cosmology could no longer be read unequivocally from the 'liberation script'. In this altered political situation, new and partly undecipherable forces could affect—and probably even condition—the inner workings of the national political universe.

Conclusion

Through an extended ethnographic analysis of the placing and later removal of a 10-meter-high metal statue in front of Mozambique's football stadium, we have argued that misunderstandings are not just communicative glitches but can also be socially productive. One particular way in which misunderstandings acquire social efficacy, we suggest, is by being enfolded in physical objects, whose qualities (both semantic and material) orient the relational efficacy of mutual misunderstandings. This is what we have described as entextualization through materiality, which has been presented here in two modalities, namely, a present and an absent one.

First, the physical presence of the statue instantiates a form of entextualization that pivots around the statue itself. Mutual misunderstandings revolve around the particular qualities of the statue and involve a relatively limited set of relations: Chinese engineers are deeply puzzled about the Mozambicans' lack of enthusiasm for this aesthetic aspect of the project, while the Mozambican officials are increasingly bewildered that their 'mysterious' Chinese interlocutors will neither remove the statue nor give a reasonable explanation. Second, with the removal of the statue, the mutual incomprehension indexed by the absent statue expands outward from the virtual stage atop the empty

pedestal. No longer oriented around the qualities of the statue itself, it stimulates a tweaking of the broader socio-political universe. We could even say that the physical statue contained, while its removal unleashed, a form of social engagement based on the maintenance and intensification of a particular communicative breakdown. So let us finally consider the two stages of this process of entextualization and how the removal of the statue affected the dynamics of mutual misunderstandings.

To many of the Mozambican officials working at the construction site, imageries of religion, national symbolism, and infrastructural materiality came to constitute a field of contestation held together and further intensified by the tension-ridden negotiations over the goddess-like statue. During the hectic period when the statue was still standing on the pedestal, it served to transport and interject alterity, as it were, into localized modalities of social life without any one of these being captured by or translated into the terms of any other. It is in this sense that the misunderstandings came to provide a certain (limited) mode of transformation: as Sino-Mozambican communication was gradually breaking down, the lack of mutual intelligibility became a way of structuring everyday life in a social milieu where interactions with an incomprehensible other could not be avoided. To the Mozambican and Chinese officials alike, the materiality of the statue gradually came to serve as a semantic vehicle by which these agents could identify the basic coordinates of a fraught relational terrain. While mutual misunderstandings abounded, they were essentially contained by the statue and the accompanying speculations among the Mozambicans about why it had not been removed and, conversely, among the Chinese about why it could not stay at the square in front of the stadium.

If the statue rendered key traits from different domains extractable and thus prone to acquire efficacy in other contexts, its absence liberated mutual misunderstandings from the limitations that the statue put on them as their primary semantic modality. In other words, mutual misunderstandings were no longer guided by the conceptual register afforded by the statue (which initially led to speculations about questions such as "Why didn't they remove the statue?" "Why don't they keep the statue?"). So when Sérgio creatively introduced alternative cosmological scenarios by way of the photograph of President Guebuza on his desk, he was not guided by a puzzlement about the rationale behind the Chinese engineers' refusal to remove the statue. Instead, the communicative breakdown around the contested statue had produced a new realm of cosmological politics in which the absent statue was interwoven with local Mozambican ideas about spiritual hierarchies and political authority. While deliberately experimenting with a strategically misconstrued set of events, an altered social universe was thereby provisionally rendered accessible.

The question then remains as to whether a present and an absent statue semantically operate in similar ways. Or, rather, does the absent statue continue

to entextualize mutual misunderstandings in the same way that it did when still standing on the pedestal? According to Frers (2013: 432), absence opens a "rift" in the present, a haunting emotional experience of something that was once there and endures through a sensuous longing for it. And, as Sartre ([1943] 2005) once reminded us, it is not only the absent phenomenon (whether a person, an idea, or an object) that has disappeared. In his famous example of coming to meet 'Pierre' in a café and realizing that he is not there, it is Sartre's perception of the space as such that changes: "Pierre is absent from the whole café; his absence fixes the café in its evanescence" (ibid.: 34). Through the absence, it then becomes possible to reimagine the social landscape, which is filled with one's own emotions and imaginations. Absence asserts itself as a corporeal, emotional, and sensuous experience, but in a way that offers a possible reordering of certain registers of social life.

It is with the notion of absence that we slightly diverge from most recent studies on entextualization. As we have emphasized above, what we take away from studies of entextualization is the way that information (speech acts or texts) becomes shareable by being transported across different semantic modalities even though it undergoes irreversible transformations along the way (Bauman and Briggs 1990). In many myths, for instance, a collective force is maintained precisely through undergoing transformations that happen at the same pace as in the surrounding society (Gow 2001; Lévi-Strauss 1974). With its removal, however, the statue could no longer stabilize mutual misunderstandings around the issue of its questionable legitimacy as a national symbol and as a representation of an eternal Sino-Mozambican friendship. In a Sartrean sense, the absent statue therefore ended up suffusing its surroundings with its own qualities but loosened its conceptual grip on social life.

Through its absence, the statue continued to transport mutual incomprehension but now in a way that opened up toward a changed and plural social terrain. No longer a question of why the Mozambican officials had misunderstood a symbol of friendship or whether the Chinese engineers were actually acting the part of colonial masters, the entextualized misunderstandings produced a tweaked plural social universe. By suggesting that the Mozambican president was bowing to the (absent) Chinese goddess, Sérgio effectively challenged the dominant 'liberation script' that continues to ideologically buttress the governing Frelimo party. On the Chinese side, the absent statue brought into question the idea that Chinese projects can seamlessly extend into Africa, and the very silence concerning the removal of the statue suggests an embarrassing consciousness of getting it wrong.

As we have shown above, the mutual misunderstandings around the statue were divisive in the sense that Mozambicans and Chinese came to see each other as incomprehensible. However, the realization that understanding was limited affected both sides, and it is in this sense that we return to misunderstanding

as both occurrence and reflexivity. The Mozambican and Chinese interlocutors not only misunderstood each other but were also acutely aware of this ongoing communicative breakdown. It was through the *Spirit of Eternity* that this eerie sense of something being 'off' was first built up and then unleashed to open up new social and even cosmological terrains on both sides.

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Notes

1. See Fabian (1995: 41) for an elaboration of this argument.
2. In *On Language*, Humboldt ([1936] 1988: 63) wrote that "nobody means by a word precisely and exactly what his neighbor does, and the difference, be it ever so small, vibrates, like a ripple in water, throughout the entire language. Thus all understanding is always at the same time a not-understanding."
3. As argued by Webb Keane (2005: 72), ordinary language contains metalanguage (reflexive language about action) that guides actors "with a description of what is going on." Such descriptions are not drawn from an inner library of detached thoughts but from a vocabulary of actions shared with others, and they are used predominantly when actors reflect on their actions *to* others. Since a given shared language involves an intuitive awareness of sharing and of being part of a broader community, local metalanguages "demand an epistemology of intimacy" (ibid.: 73) to capture the non-explicit, habitual, and often concealed features of action. The moment an act is lifted out of its interactional setting, however, an epistemology of estrangement is required in order not to take it as "obvious, natural, self-contained" (ibid.: 83).
4. By means of three tightly integrated ethnographic fieldwork projects in Mozambique and Mongolia, the "Imperial Potentialities" research project aimed to shed light on China's globalization and growing political-economic involvement in Central Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In addition to the authors of this article, the project included a third anthropologist who specializes in Mongolia, Morten Axel Pedersen. Findings have been published in a number of articles and will soon be available in a book by all three entitled *Collaborative Damage: An Experimental Ethnography of Chinese Globalization* (Bunkenborg et al., forthcoming).
5. Anhui Foreign Economic Construction Group (安徽省外经建设集团) is a large-scale Chinese company engaged in international construction projects and the development of overseas mineral resources.
6. These observations are based on personal communications with national academics and journalists, who prefer to remain anonymous.
7. It was not possible for Nielsen to get copies of the minutes, but state officials graciously allowed him to carefully go through them while taking notes.

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