

SAIS *Working Papers in African Studies*

03-08

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Summary

The rapidly evolving China-Africa relationship presents opportunities and challenges for Africa. Some African countries are benefiting from higher commodity prices arising from immense demand for natural resources for China's manufacturing industry. Chinese trade, investment and infrastructure aid are fundamentally re-shaping Africa's economies to the benefit of local consumers and business in some countries but also to the primary benefit of ruling elites in others especially extraction-based economies.

Civil society actors in Africa should work to ensure that their respective countries' economic and political interests, rather than as distinct from elite interests and preoccupations, are central to their governments' engagement with China. In particular, civil society in Africa should work to hold their governments accountable to ensure that while Africa maximizes the benefits of Chinese trade and investment in the interests of all citizens. Africa's civil society must devise innovative responses to address human rights and governance challenges in China-Africa relations.

Many in Africa hope that China's emergence as a major global power will offer Africa an enhanced role in world affairs in contrast to the post-Soviet uni-polar world dominated by the US and its European allies. Africa's governments should seek to maximize the benefits of a potential strategic partnership with China, while actively working to avoid the perpetuation of an asymmetrical relationship akin to Africa's current trade and political relations with the West.

How Africa Discovered China

African agency in the evolution of China-Africa relations is often downplayed or ignored entirely by many contemporary Western commentators. The origins of the relationship was not a one-way traffic, with a passive Africa responding to Chinese overtures; on the contrary, African individuals and governments of their own motion, initiated contact and sought relations with China; African liberation movements sought assistance from China from the 1950s and post-independence leaders such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda looked to China for models of political and socio-economic organization as the emergent African states embarked on nation-building in the 1960s. Furthermore, the evolution of the relationship was not confined to inter-governmental (or inter-party)¹ relations. There are long standing personal and commercial links between Africa and China. From the 1950s, businesspeople from Hong

Kong and Taiwan as well the overseas Chinese diaspora in South-East Asia began establishing trading ties with African counterparts. Taiwan and Hong Kong were widely known across Africa by the early 1970s as sources for imports of cheap textiles and consumer goods with African traders visiting regularly to place orders and negotiate deals with Chinese trade partners. For instance, traders from southeastern Nigeria established extensive trade networks, often based on personal relationships, with Hong Kong and Taiwan manufacturers and traders as well as with overseas Chinese communities in south-east Asia. Hong Kong and Taiwan traders began to establish representative offices and trading outposts in African countries in the late 1970s and eventually began to invest in manufacturing and trading operations in Africa.

By the late 1980s, there was a visible increase in Chinese residents and Chinese-owned businesses in many African countries. The introduction by the US government in the late 1990s of preferential textile quotas for Africa encouraged some Chinese firms to establish operations in African countries to exploit this opportunity. The increased popularity of kung fu movies in the 1970s led to the establishment of schools of martial arts and enhanced interest in Buddhism and Confucianism among young people in major African cities; these developments led to relatively greater awareness of China among ordinary Africans - although often with distorted perceptions of Chinese history and culture.²

Some Africans who visited China as students, traders or employees of Chinese businesses eventually stayed on and settled in China. In recent years, some Chinese companies, universities and schools have recruited employees (including academics and foreign language teachers) from the African diaspora in Europe and North America.³ Reliable statistics on African residents in China are hard to come by for various reasons and since the late 1990s a considerable number of non-documented African migrants have settled in China. The growing number of African residents in China is widening and deepening people-to-people contacts between China and Africa and may soon attain some political significance.

China-African relations based primarily on ideological or 'third world' solidarity dwindled in the 1980s as China increasingly adopted economic liberalization policies promoted by Deng Xiaoping and other post-Mao Chinese leaders. As China re-focused its relations with Africa from ideology to trade in the 1990s, the dominant image of China in Africa also changed from ideological ally against colonialism, apartheid and Western domination to business partner and emerging economic colossus. The Chinese doctor or technical aid worker traded places with the Chinese entrepreneur or state corporation. Trade between China and Africa has expanded rapidly from an approximate US\$12 million in the early 1950s to about US\$18.55 billion in 2003. Chinese government figures estimate the number of Chinese companies operating in Africa in June 2004 at 674 with a total investment of US\$1.509 billion (Nduru, 2005). Chinese businesses [state-owned and private] operating in Africa have invested in diverse sectors of African economies including mining, agriculture, fisheries, tropical hardwoods, manufacturing, telecommunications, construction, entertainment, leisure and hospitality (Marks, 2006). China has cancelled billions of dollars of the debt it is owed by African states and has

offered further debt relief and additional aid to many African countries (Melville and Owen 2005). Chinese trade and investment in Africa, particularly in terms of oil and natural resources, has also increased rapidly.

Why China is attractive to Africa

China's emergence as a major economic power in the 1990s is of great interest for Africa's rulers and ruled for various reasons. The vexed question of China as 'alternative' political and economic model for Africa warrants nuanced analysis. It is not possible (and perhaps irresponsible) to attempt broad generalizations of 'African' perceptions of China as a model or indeed of a universal 'China model'. Perceptions often derive from the geographical, political and socio-economic situation of the Africa observer. For example, perceptions of China's emergence as a major global power and the evolution of China-Africa relations among Africa's intelligentsia and civil society often arise from considerations quite disparate from those which actuate the preferred perception among some of Africa's rulers of China as exemplar of development sans democracy.

There is accordingly no 'African' perception or view of China. A key to assessing China's impact on individual African countries is to keep in mind that China's trade and political relations with Africa elicit diverse perceptions from the respective populations of African countries often differing by social strata, economic sector and geographical region even within countries.

For some among Africa's contemporary rulers, China is living proof of 'successful' alternatives to Western political and economic models. The semi-colonial Western domination of pre-revolutionary China is often cited in some circles in Africa as broadly comparable to Western colonialism and neo-colonialism in Africa. In particular, the governance and economic 'conditionalities' imposed by Western donors and the international finance institutions (IFIs) on African governments seeking loans and aid are often approximated to the 'unequal treaties' imposed on China by the West in the 19th century. China's status as a developing country in the 1950s through the 1990s is often cited by some in Africa as corresponding with Africa's post-colonial experience.

Advocates of the one-party state and 'African socialism' in post-colonial Africa contended in the 1960s that Western models of liberal democracy and capitalism were unsuited to Africa's material conditions and to its history and cultures. Fierce debate polarized African academia and intellectual circles in the 1970s and 1980s as to whether Western political and economic models could be transported to non-Western societies especially Africa, whether capitalism or Soviet-style socialism was the better model for Africa or whether African states could craft a unique 'Third Way' to nirvana. The end of the Cold War and the apparent triumph of the Washington Consensus led to a temporary cessation of the debate partly due to post-Soviet disillusionment and the intellectual exhaustion of the African Left.

China's breath-taking state-led development especially its lifting over 400 million from dire poverty within two decades reinvigorates African critics of the Washington Consensus and encourages those who advocate that Africa look to East Asia for political and economic models. Harking back to the 'Asian values' and 'cultural relativism' debates on human rights and development of the early 1990s, the proponents of this viewpoint argued that human rights and democracy are irrelevant to Africa's development needs citing China as an exemplar of development sans democracy.

In effect, the debate in Africa about appropriate paths to Africa's development has been re-ignited by China's emergence as a major global power. For many among Africa's ruled who are physically and intellectually exhausted by two decades of economic 'reform' supposedly adopted by African government but driven by Western governments, donors and the IFIs, China represents hope that another world is possible in which bread is accorded primacy over the vote. Globalization especially the phenomenon of 'jobless growth' has resulted in widespread popular disillusionment in Africa with 'structural adjustment' and 'poverty reduction'. This disillusionment creates conditions for debate as to the viability and efficacy of Western political and economic models in Africa. (Daily Trust, April 24, 2006).⁴

The more appropriate question may be 'which China model'? Admiration in Africa for China's economic success is often balanced with acute recognition of the social costs of success and lack of political freedoms. In this perspective, a distinction is made between China as 'economic model' and 'political model'. There is, by way of example, evidence of observers in Africa's media taking a not wholly uncritical assessment of China's economic progress and its implications for democracy and governance in Africa. The 'Daily Trust' newspaper unfavorably compares Nigeria's economic policy management, particularly the adoption of economic reforms recommended by the World Bank and the IMF, with China's economic policy. It calls for Nigeria's leadership to draw lessons from China's experience with economic reform.

According to the paper - "In his celebrated book, 'Globalization and Its Discontents', the winner of Nobel Prize in Economics, Joseph Stiglitz, showed that the miracle of China lies in good governance, public-private sector partnership and a genuine home-driven policy agenda as opposed to branded neo-liberal IMF/World Bank policies contained in the notorious Washington Consensus. China promotes the state-led gradualist reform agenda with remarkable social protection for the mass of potential losers as opposed to Nigeria's "shock-therapy" reform in which a few winners are indulged while the mass of losers are left bare. China did not pursue doctrinaire privatization policy but encouraged state enterprises side by side (with) private enterprises with the eye on value-adding activities, employment-creation and inclusive development" (Daily Trust 24/04/06).

In contrast, an editorial in the Nigerian broadsheet, 'New Age' notes that "The Chinese people have had to pay a heavy price in political repression and environmental degradation" (New Age, March 31, 2006).

There is also evidence of nuanced perspectives among Africa's political leaders on China's 'peaceful rise' and democratic development in China. The senior leader of the Nigerian legislature, Senate President Ken Nnamani in a welcome address entitled "China: A Partner and Example of Development and Democracy" during President Hu's April 2006 visit to Nigeria commends China's 'outstanding (economic) performance exclusive of western democracy' as "the paradox of development and democracy". According to him -

“China has become...a good model for Nigeria in its quest for an authentic and stable development ideology...China (is) a lesson to Nigeria on the enormous good that a focused and patriotic leadership can do to realize the dreams of prosperity and security for the citizens...in embracing China...it should not only be in field of economic prosperity since...(China's) steady and gradual democratization confirms the lesson that no nation can sustain economic development in the long run without democracy" (THISDAY 28/04/06).

Nnamani's comments above presage the realization among some African leaders that the burgeoning Chinese middle classes will not accept indefinitely the prosperity-for-acquiescence offered by the Community Party and that China will in the long term evolve towards some form of representative government.

China, Africa and the World

China's rise as a major global power is of immense interest to African leaders, civil society and scholars of foreign policy and international political economy. The end of the Cold War brought welcome changes especially the end of superpower proxy wars fought on Africa's soil which speeded up the liberation of Namibia and South Africa. The uni-polar world dominated by the Western powers especially the US that followed is the source of much discomfort for many African intellectuals and political leaders. In this light, China's emergence as a major axis of global power is welcomed among many African intellectuals who hope that it may herald a return to a global multi-polarity in which milieu Africa and the developing countries will have a greater role on the global stage than they currently do. The former Nigerian foreign minister and scholar of Africa's international relations, Bolaji Akinyemi, welcomes 'strategic cooperation' between China and Nigeria, noting that stronger ties between the Asian and African heavyweights were long overdue (Nigeria2Day 28/04/06) and argues that;

"China is an emerging world power with a booming economy. She needs oil. Nigeria needs as much investment as possible, and to diversify the sources of its investment. In the Middle East, the United States regards China's incursion with alarm, but Nigeria is more virgin territory for suitors and Washington should not be too worried. It insulates Nigeria from influence by one power" (Nigeria2Day 28/04/06).

China's enhanced presence in Africa has generated a flurry of Western media reportage and commentary, often with graphic headlines, the prevailing note of which is that Chinese trade, political and security cooperation may enable repressive regimes in Africa to avoid even the relatively limited constraints on their conduct imposed by Western donor conditionalities. Many in Africa's civil society are deeply conflicted over Western donor conditionalities and Western political and economic models. On the one hand, they actively seek political liberalization in Africa and realize acutely that Western donor conditionalities are sometimes invaluable to securing same. African NGOs often collaborated with Western NGOs to pressure Western governments to demand political liberalization from African governments as a pre-condition for further development assistance.

On the other hand, many among Africa's civil society actors perceive the Bretton Woods-inspired economic reforms as having largely failed to alleviate or reduce poverty or indeed as having exacerbated poverty in Africa. They also note that many African governments have engaged in a political sleight of hand in adopting the absolute minimum in political reform such as to enable Western governments and aid bureaucracies to justify continuing aid flows to home legislatures, all the while vigorously resisting genuine democratization.⁵ African civil society angst over the conditionalities is heightened by their external origins which reinforce notions of powerlessness and irrelevance.

Another important optic in assessing China's impact on Africa is - which Africa is benefiting or losing. Which countries and sectors within countries are benefiting or losing? Commodity/resource/oil exporters may gain in the short term but manufacturing industry within Africa may lose. African elites may gain from opaque deals on extraction of natural resources with China but the African poor may lose more due to job losses, greater corruption and political repression.

Similarly, African workers and small businesspeople who have lost out on account of Chinese exports of cheap consumer goods will often adopt a situational perspective on China; as consumers, they benefit from imports of cheap consumer goods from China but as workers or businesspeople who have lost jobs or businesses, they may resent Chinese exports. Unemployed African youths may resent Chinese companies which prefer to import labour from China rather than hire local youths.

There are critical voices among Africa's rulers. South African president Thabo Mbeki and his Nigerian counterpart, Olusegun Obasanjo have both criticized Chinese companies for violating labour and safety standards. Mbeki has gone so far as to warn against a new Chinese colonialism in Africa.

China's renewed engagement in Africa has had the effect of bringing Africa to the foreground of attention of Western leaders and has also spurred India to intensify its economic diplomacy in Africa. Africa's resources remain relatively unexploited but after the demise of the Soviet Union, the West has mostly held Africa in reserve, seemingly taking for granted that it would have first call to the continent's resources whenever the

need for them arose (French, 2005). A meeting of experts and diplomats convened by the African Union in Addis Ababa in September 2006 warned against the China-Africa relationship slipping into and repeating the historical trajectory of Africa's relations with the West. While the AU experts appreciated that Chinese investment gave Africa new leverage, they noted criticisms that China was making "no serious effort" to "transfer skills and knowledge to Africa" and urged China to relocate some of its industries to Africa "as a reflection of a true spirit of partnership" (Amosu, 2007). In April 2007, the Nigerian government convened a meeting of African foreign policy scholars and diplomats in Abuja on the theme 'The New Scramble for Africa'; speakers at the conference expressed fears of Africa being caught up in a new Cold War between China and the West with African resources as the bone of contention.

Human Security

While China's rapidly expanding engagement in Africa is enthusiastically welcomed by African governments and intellectuals, human rights NGOs in Africa and beyond increasingly perceive China's relations with Africa's governments as problematic for governance and human rights in Africa. This does not mean that African activists adopt a wholly critical attitude towards China's enhanced role; many in Africa's civil society appreciate the significance of the new trade and investment opportunities that China offers and value immensely the strategic leverage it potentially offers Africa in its convoluted [and often Byzantine] relationship with the West.

While China affords African governments a new source of leverage in their relations with the West, civil society in Africa is concerned about the potential loss of a major source of leverage in dealing with their own governments. Over the last two decades, transnational NGO networks and enhanced cooperation between African and Western NGOs have served to put pressure on Western governments and business in relation to human rights abuses and democratization in Africa. The ability of African human rights activists to call on colleagues in Western countries to mobilize pressure on their governments to, for example, demand that imprisoned opposition figures be released as a pre-condition for further aid flows, has served as an informal life assurance for many African activists. Given that many African governments are increasingly turning to China for political and economic cooperation, without the 'human rights and democracy strings' often imposed by Western governments, it seems likely that a significant source of leverage over their governments by African activists and their Western allies may be eroded. This presents significant challenges for human rights advocates in Africa.

Human rights concerns about China's renewed engagement in Africa must of necessity extend beyond China-Africa inter-governmental relations. Indeed, it may be argued that in near future, the role of the Chinese private sector in Africa may come to acquire as great significance, if not greater, than that of the Chinese government or its state-owned enterprises in Africa. Some Chinese private companies operating in Africa have been accused by NGOs of violating health and safety standards as well employment

and environmental rights in the communities where they operate. NGOs in Nigeria have accused the Chinese logging company WEMPCO of discharging untreated effluents into the Cross River in southeastern Nigeria, thereby damaging the health and livelihoods of local fisher folk. The company is also accused of colluding with local officials and law enforcement to suppress protests by the local community. The Chinese metalworking firm, WAHUM operating in Lagos, Nigeria, has also been accused by NGOs of discharging noxious substances into the air and systematic violations of occupational safety and health standards. Chinese-owned mines in Zambia are frequently accused of violating occupational safety and health standards as well as preferring to import Chinese labour rather than hire locals.

Chinese business activities in Africa cannot be entirely risk-free in the absence of peace and stability which cannot be secured in the absence of democracy and human rights. In particular, that unrestrained exports of light arms exacerbate conflicts in Africa and worsen trafficking in small arms which may well end up used against Chinese companies and nationals operating in Africa. In the Beijing Declaration issued at the first China-Africa Co-operation Forum in October 2000, the Chinese government committed itself along with African governments to strengthen their co-operation in stopping the illegal production, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons in Africa.

There is significant potential of violence directed at Chinese businesses and nationals in Africa by insurgent groups and rebel movements who regard China as an ally of the local repressive regime. As such, an 'all-comers-served' approach to security cooperation with African governments may not continue for much longer without significant cost to China; China would do well to re-examine its security cooperation with some African governments.⁶

Chinese industry has distinguished itself primarily for cost-efficient manufacturing but as Chinese companies move up the global business pecking order and discover the considerable mark-up to be derived from possessing premium brands and intellectual property, they will seek to establish their own brands rather than continue to serve as generic contract manufacturers or service providers to whom Western brands outsource production and support services. As Chinese capitalism matures and global branding becomes more important to Chinese companies, Chinese companies operating globally increasingly become vulnerable to brand pressure including the 'naming-and-shaming' tactics adopted by NGOs in Western consumer markets in relation to their image and associations. African NGOs can also work with Western NGO colleagues to invoke threats to mobilize mass boycotts of Chinese-made consumer goods in Western markets in order to protest China's arms exports to repressive governments in Africa.

After an initial phase of snapping up resource extraction concessions, it is well nigh conceivable that China will be compelled by instability and conflict in Africa to realize that its long term economic interests are best served by promoting peace in Africa and that this is most likely to come about by encouraging representative government in Africa rather than supporting dictators. As Chinese investors move beyond resource extraction to investments of a long term nature, they will increasingly mount pressure on

their government to avoid actions or policies likely to exacerbate instability or conflict or to lead them to being associated with human rights abuses and repressive regimes in Africa and elsewhere. In the long term, it is conceivable that greater internal political liberalization within China will also result in less appetite for supporting repressive regimes in Africa.

Conclusion

Africa can derive important lessons from China's development experience especially China's success in liberating approximately 400 million of its nationals from absolute poverty in a little over two decades. The challenge is for African policymakers and civil society to identify the appropriate lessons from China's experience and adapt there from to the specific circumstances of the respective African countries. Given the sad trajectory of economic decline and political repression in much of Africa since 1960, African leaders, civil society and intelligentsia should endeavour to learn from China's success in economic management especially public-private partnership, visionary leadership and a home-grown economic reform agenda. Africa's advocates of liberal democracy and human rights, while encouraging their governments to learn and adapt from China's economic success, must vigorously resist attempts by some African governments to invoke China's economic success to rationalize avoiding political liberalization.

The rapidly evolving China-Africa relationship offers immense opportunities for Africa but may also present new challenges. Africa should embrace the opportunities offered by strategic partnership with China, whilst seeking to preserve and promote its interests. By the nature of their trade, human rights NGOs and trade unionists tend to focus on the (potential) downsides of greater China-Africa engagement especially instances where repressive regimes have sought to avoid Western donor pressures for human rights, labour or environmental standards. Africa's civil society however needs to examine how best to react to the challenges presented by China's engagement in Africa and find a median between avoid uncritical acceptance or knee-jerk rejectionism. In particular, Africa civil society can derive lessons from the experiences of other countries in engaging with China.

The need for Africans to understand China and its motives for engagement with Africa is now greater than ever before. Relatively little is known about China among African civil society actors beyond Western media reportage. At a very minimum, African civil society actors need to learn more about China as a country and its motives for engaging in Africa in order to develop a feasible agenda for responding to the opportunities and challenges presented by China's increasing engagement in Africa. However there is relatively little scholarly or policy literature on China-Africa relations generated within Africa. It is critical that civil society in Africa initiate efforts towards enhanced thought and action on the strategic implications of China's increasing

engagement with Africa, particularly in relation to human rights and democracy in Africa.

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¹ The international liaison section of the Chinese Community has long standing contacts with political parties and movements in Africa dating from the 1950s.

2 It is important to note that many ordinary Africans often have difficulty distinguishing nationals of the People's Republic of China from Hong Kong residents, Taiwanese and Overseas Chinese. From personal recollections of interaction with Chinese residents in Nigeria in the early 1980s, it would appear that at least some preferred to maintain a strategic ambiguity.

3 Contacts between African immigrants in the West and China warrants further research. From anecdotal sources, an increasing number of African immigrants import 'Afro-centric' goods and materials such as textiles from Chinese 'contract' manufacturers for sale to African/Caribbean immigrant communities and to the African-American community.

⁴ President Hu Jintao's April 2006 state visit to Nigeria sparked off fierce debate among Nigeria's chattering classes as to the utility of continuing with economic reforms prescribed by the IFIs and Western donors.

5 Notorious examples include Yoweri Museveni in Uganda, Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia, Lansana Conte in Guinea and Idriss Deby in Chad.

⁶ Militant groups in the Niger Delta issued threats against Chinese interests and nationals following the signing of new oil and gas deals during President Hu's April 2006 visit to Nigeria (Washington Post 01/05/06). In an e-mail to news organizations, a spokesman for the militant group, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta, (which has previously kidnapped Western oil workers and recently detonated two car bombs in the oil cities of Warri and Port Harcourt), criticized China for grabbing a US\$2.2 billion stake in a Niger Delta oil field last year and stated -

"We wish to warn the Chinese government and its oil companies to steer well clear of the Niger Delta...Chinese citizens found in oil installations will be treated as thieves. The Chinese government by investing in stolen crude places its citizens in our line of fire."