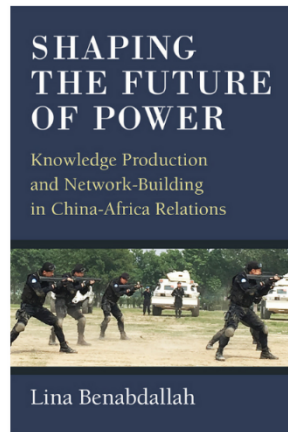


AFRICA AND CHINA

CENTER STAGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY



New Directions in Africa-China Studies ed. by Chris Alden and Daniel Large (2018)

Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations by Lina Benabdallah (2020)

China, Africa, and the Future of the Internet by Iginio Gagliardone (2020)

Takeaways

1. Recent scholarship further complicates and tries to move beyond crude descriptions of Chinese involvement and investment in Africa that portrays it as either “neocolonial debt-trap diplomacy” or benevolent “win-win” anti-colonial cooperation.
2. China’s own developmental success, status as a still developing country, and anti-colonial rhetoric make the “China model” attractive for many African decisionmakers.
3. The significance and scale of Chinese involvement in Africa has given rise to an interdisciplinary field of Africa-China Studies that is in the process of defining itself, but draws heavily on insights from post-colonial studies.
4. Two spaces in which China’s engagement with Africa is markedly different than precedents established by the West are (1) human resource management and (2) information and telecommunications.
5. Evidence of China exporting its authoritarian model are as yet thin.

Africa and China: Center Stages of the 21st Century

Brian Spivey

For the UCI Long US-China Institute's first Book Roundup, I covered three recently published books about China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—the amorphous and hugely ambitious scheme to infrastructurally knit together a Eurasian community with China at the center. This second Book Roundup follows up on this broader topic of China's central role in global transformations by looking at three recently published books about the relationship between China and Africa.

Over the past decade, China has become Africa's largest trading partner and largest bilateral creditor. It also provides the most UN peacekeeping personnel to the continent and finances the most infrastructure construction. China's increased engagement with the continent has generated a great deal of interest, excitement, and anxiety among politicians, policy makers, and strategists inside and outside of Africa. The continent is increasingly seen as an important front of geopolitical competition between the United States and China—one in which the former appears increasingly uncompetitive and less ambitious. For many Africans, centuries of colonialism and exploitation combined with the relatively lackluster results of Western developmental hegemony marshalled by financial organizations like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have rendered the prospect of alternative development and capital investment strategies appealing.

China's own developmental success story and ambition to transform the global political economy

to its benefit through BRI suggests to many that one such alternative has finally arrived. Indeed, the scale and coordination of Chinese investment in Africa is enormous and is portrayed by the Chinese government as having fewer strings attached. African countries do not need to liberalize—economically or politically—in order to access Chinese capital.

Echoing criticisms of BRI projects elsewhere in the world, many skeptics, critics, and geopolitical opponents of Chinese involvement in Africa have accused China of building a new type of colonial configuration on the continent through debt-trap diplomacy wherein African countries are forced to cede sovereignty to China over unpaid debts. These accusations were a hallmark of the Trump administration, though not necessarily unique to it—Hillary Clinton also warned against China's "new colonialism" in Africa when she was Secretary of State. By contrast, the Chinese government's characterization of their involvement in Africa strikes a different tone: Chinese investment and infrastructure projects in Africa are clear "win-win" endeavors that will finally provide the foundations of African development shorn of the legacies of Western colonialism and hegemonic practices.

Debates about Chinese investment in Africa are local affairs too. For example, in the summer of 2020, Nigerian legislators were alarmed that a commercial loan agreement with China signed by their government included a clause that would waive Nigeria's economic sovereignty if it defaulted on the loan. Proponents countered that this was based on a misreading of the clause (and it was a misreading) and that the clause was standard in Chinese commercial loan contracts.¹ Still, these debates reveal the extent to which

¹ Laure Deron, "Did Nigeria Really Cede Its Sovereignty to China in a Loan Agreement?" *The Diplomat*, August 12, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/08/did-nigeria-really-cede-its-sovereignty-to-china-in-a-loan-agreement/>.

many legislators and policymakers in Africa remain unsure in their interpretations of China's increasing influence—is this just a familiar colonialism or exploitation under another name, with another metropolitan referent? The promises and potential of an exportable “China Model” or “Beijing Consensus” have garnered significant attention in Africa and among outside observers—just how exportable and replicable can China's own developmental success be? Does China truly offer an alternative? One can appreciate the continued salience of these questions when the answers are so often mediated by the geopolitical anxieties and enthusiasms coalescing on either side of China's growing global influence, particularly in the Global South.

The three books I review here respond to these broader questions insofar as they suggest that Chinese involvement in Africa is of a scale, diversity, and distinctive quality that cannot be profitably characterized in familiar or binary terms like “neo-colonialism” or “win-win.” That the reality is more nuanced than the official messaging of two powers jockeying for global leadership is perhaps not surprising. But the nuanced analysis still needs to be made.

In *Shaping the Future of Power: Knowledge Production and Network-Building in China-Africa Relations*, Lina Benabdallah argues that “people-centered relations” are central factors in China's foreign policy practices in Africa. Benabdallah elaborates how Chinese influence on the continent is driven not just by material accomplishments like new highways, railways, ports, and stadiums, but also especially the development of social and professional networks. As mainstream International Relations theory lacks the frameworks for understanding this aspect of China's foreign policy strategy in Africa, she

develops the concept of “relational productive power” as a way of describing how China-sponsored “official visits, expert trainings, and academic and cultural exchanges” (p. 5) facilitate the flow of knowledge, expertise, norms, influence, and ideas from China to Africa. It is the social capital and social networks built from these practices (for example, the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation [FOCAC]) that give China's power on the continent its heft and also make it distinctive from Western strategies. Benabdallah concludes that the strong people-centered aspects of China's engagement with Africa is novel and unique—or at least not easily comprehended by Western mainstream IR theory—and lends further urgency to the need to understand relations between Global South actors (like China and Africa) on their own terms.

In *China, Africa, and the Future of the Internet*, Iginio Gagliardone examines China's involvement in building Africa's telecommunications infrastructure. Gagliardone is also interested in assessing the record and future potential for the exportation of a more strict, authoritarian Chinese model of information governance and surveillance. Is Chinese telecommunications investment in Africa a vehicle for the exportation of an authoritarian political model? Gagliardone compares case studies in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Kenya, and Ghana in order to “cut through” geopolitically motivated narratives that portray China as either a new colonial power or as the benevolent purveyor of “win-win” investments. He concludes (1) that China has not actively promoted its authoritarian model in these countries, (2) that China has not privileged providing assistance to authoritarian countries, and (3) that China's investment in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in these cases did not give rise to more authoritarian tendencies. However, he cautions

against reading these conclusions too optimistically: the judgments of longer-term consequences cannot yet be made, and we have little access to high-level decision-making in China on this subject.

New Directions in Africa-China Studies is an interdisciplinary edited volume by Chris Alden and Daniel Large that is a self-conscious attempt to outline the features of past scholarship on China and Africa as well as to define a nascent field of Africa-China Studies. The field is composed of eclectic, interdisciplinary research that, in its current state, is characterized more by its diversity than its conformity. As each of the varied individual chapters that comprise the book touch on different subjects, I will underline several key observations from the volume as a whole.

First, the field is concerned with the degree to which Africa's diversity is often flattened and treated as a unitary continent as opposed to a collection of countries that require individual study (the document you are currently reading has fallen into this easy trap). The case studies about Tanzania, Kenya, Benin, and Mauritius that comprise the second section of the book exemplify a different approach. The book, however, also warns against the "limiting confines of methodological nationalism" and hails progress made in building transnational and transregional analyses (pp. 7, 13). Second, contemporary research seems to trend around International Relations and "development-based" topics like trade, investment, and infrastructure—to the detriment of our broader understanding of society and culture (p. 21). Third, drawing on insights from post-colonial studies, the field pays close attention

to "how knowledge is constructed, by whom and to what ends" in China-Africa as a subject of research (p. 15). Several chapters note that relations between China and Africa are highly "mediated" (p. 7)—especially by the Euro-American ideologies, images, and frameworks of understanding through which China has approached Africa. In short, politics and power shape mutual understandings and their effects must be accounted for. Fourth, the power imbalance inherent in China's involvement in Africa is and will be a crucial concern of the field. The question of African agency and tendency to frame Africa as the passive object of Chinese action is a related concern (e.g., "What is China doing in or to Africa?" is a typical investigative framework).

This new period defined by China's large-scale involvement in Africa cannot yet be judged in a historical past tense and we are no longer in a speculative future tense, but we are instead in the midst of interpreting an ongoing phenomenon that is in many ways without precedent. It seems that we can begin to discuss some preliminary results of Chinese investment in Africa and their effects. So far, they complicate sensationalistic narratives driven by geopolitical interests (even if those interests still act as the gravitational center for how Anglophone scholarship on the topic frames its questions). And yet the *future* of China's relationship to Africa is still a principal focus—"future" appears in two of the titles—what new political, social, and economic configurations will arise out of China's involvement in the continent? Are China and Africa indeed the center stages of the 21st century?

For more information on the relationship between China and Africa, check out the following publications and links:

China's Power in Africa: A New Global Order by Olayiwola Abegunrin and Charity Manyeruke (2020)

China's New Role in African Politics: From Non-Intervention towards Stabilization? Ed. Christof Hartmann and Nele Noesselt (2020)

The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa by Ching Kwan Lee (2017)

The Next Factory of the World: How Chinese Investment Is Reshaping Africa by Irene Yuan Sun (2017)

China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa by Howard French (2014)

The China in Africa Podcast. <https://chinaafricaproject.com/podcasts/>

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