

# Introduction

## China-Africa Relations: Political and Economic Engagement and Media Strategies

AGNES NGOMA LESLIE

### Introduction

The relationship between China and Africa has grown exponentially in the last decade resulting in China being the continent's largest trading partner, displacing Europe and the United States. The status and evolving relationship is one of the most critical developments in international affairs. The growth of China as a world power and its engagement on the continent, which is manifested in various ways, including state level and private investments involving variegated actors, has not been without controversy. An estimated one million Chinese migrants resided in Africa by 2014.<sup>1</sup> Chinese President Xi Jinping declared at the 2015 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Johannesburg, South Africa, that the China-Africa relations had reached a stage of growth "unmatched in history."<sup>2</sup> The announcement came with a major aid package, a manifestation of China's skillful use of hard, soft, and smart power that included \$60 billion in various loans, grants, and special funds, various assistance in industrialization, agricultural modernization, infrastructure, financial services, trade and investment facilitation, poverty reduction, and peace and security. It also included the training of 200,000 African technicians, 1,000 media professionals, 40,000 opportunities for Africans in China, 2,000 degree or diploma opportunities, and 30,000 government scholarships. China also promised to establish regional vocational education centers and several capacity-building colleges in Africa.

On security cooperation, President Xi announced that China would provide \$60 million in free assistance to the African Union (AU) to support the building and operation of the African Standby Force and an African Capacity for the Immediate Response to Crisis, adding: "China will continue to participate in UN peacekeeping missions in Africa and support African countries' capacity building in areas such as defense, counter-terrorism, riot prevention, customs and immigration control."<sup>3</sup> China, however, has been willing to work with any type of government whether it is democratically elected or authoritarian as in the case of Zimbabwe. It has also provided arms to dictatorships and refused to be engaged in the internal conflicts of the countries. Clearly the increase in security is mainly to safeguard China's economic interests and its citizens, particularly in countries where China has both peacekeepers and major commercial interests such as Sudan and South Sudan (oil) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (minerals).

### The State of Current China-African Relations

China's largesse serves as an interesting introduction to this special issue of the *African Studies Quarterly*, as it provides a manifestation of the positive side of the China-Africa engagement. China is often portrayed in two extremes—either very positively, bringing development and a supposedly win-win transformative experience; or negatively as imperialistic, exploitative, and

<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v16/v16i3-4a1.pdf>

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ruining the environment. These simplistic views, however, obscure a more analytical understanding of China's role and its implication for the continent. While there are some truths to both sides of the argument, as the articles in this special issue convey, the growing China-Africa engagement raises the critical questions about how African countries are managing this relationship and whether it is translating into a positive and lasting benefit for Africa. China is coherent and strategic about its objectives, which have been spelled out in its policies including the Africa White paper of 2006 and enunciated in the subsequent tri-annual FOCAC meetings and at its sixth ministerial FOCAC conference in Johannesburg in 2015. It also published a Second Africa Policy Paper in 2015. China's engagements, which crystallize in its usage of hard power, soft power, and smart power, have provoked diverse views of its intentions. Indeed some African countries including Uganda and Zambia have at times exerted their power to negotiate and forced China to re-examine its status and acquiesce to their demands.

The articles in this special issue focus on the state of current China-African relations.<sup>4</sup> The contributors examine the major issues at the continental and state levels as well as at the level of private businesses, including medium size and small businesses as well as petty traders. The themes explored include the role of African agency in China-Africa discourses; micro-practices embedded in China's foreign policy towards Africa; the capacity of the African state and its challenges; and how African states have shaped their roles in this engagement. What distinguishes this volume from others on the topic is that it examines China and Africa's evolving relationship from varying perspectives including political, economic and strategic engagement. It also provides a window into the diverse views of the Chinese citizens in their country towards Africa and how this impacts Africa's portrayal in the Chinese media and strategies adopted. It examines the big questions including: (1) Is China's "win-win" proposition viable between a strong economic giant state and fragile states? (2) How have the African states and societies shaped their roles in this engagement? (3) What is the impact of this engagement on African societies? (4) Are African communities voiceless and powerless in this engagement? Is there evidence of them exerting independence and autonomy? (5) What is China's media strategy in this engagement? This collection portrays the diversity of Sino-African engagement across the continent, identifying similarities, differences, and peculiarities. It is unique in that it includes articles from a broad range of scholars residing in Africa, China, Europe, and the United States.

Perceptions of Chinese engagement with Africa may be summarized into three categories, according to one contributor, Seifudein Adem: Sino-optimism—the view that China's engagement with Africa will lead to positive transformative possibilities; Sino-pessimism—the view that China's engagement largely benefits China and does very little for Africa; and Sino-pragmatism—a moderate sentiment between the first two opposing perspectives. Adem suggests that Sino-optimism emerged in the shadow of the discourse that China was posing a threat in Africa to the West. What is significant to note in the China-Africa relationship is the multiplicity of actors ranging from the state, semi-private enterprises, and private companies to private individuals. While the Chinese government may be clear in its objectives, the level of engagement at semi-private enterprises and private and individual companies are variegated, with the last two being the more contentious. China's approach to Africa is coherent and more strategic. The other side of this is the multiplicity of African governments engaging with one country.

The authors examine the various levels of China-Africa engagement including security, politics, trade and investments, and media strategies. They explore China's relations with different and varied countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, and Zambia. At the core of many of the articles is a central question: How do the resource-rich countries such as the DRC, South Sudan, and Ghana benefit equally with China from their engagement? The authors also analyze the evolution of China's Africa strategy, whose objective is to improve its relations with the varied African states. Is China's well-meaning, popular "win-win" goal attainable for most African countries? While Claude Kabemba interrogates the question

in reference to the DRC, the same question is applicable to most of the other African countries engaged in similar relationships with China.

The ten articles are organized within four overall topics: security, political and economic engagement, business investments, and media strategies. The first two papers focus on China's engagement broadly and theoretically, considering policies and strategies in Africa. Seifudein Adem's "Sino-Optimism in Africa" analyses the varieties of China-Africa optimism noting their dialectal linkage to the growing western Sino-pessimism discourse. Adem identifies three strands of Sino-optimism: (1) vertical Sino-optimism, which refers to China's attractiveness to the leaders and that China serves as a model for Africa's success; (2) horizontal Sino-optimism, which emphasizes the good will of ordinary Africans to China's tangible projects such as roads, and hospitals which they see and appreciate as opposite to issues like human rights and democracy; and (3) economic Sino-optimism, which emphasizes the Chinese need for raw materials that in turn prompt African exports and provide foreign exchange for African countries. Adem also provides historic and contemporary examples for the growing Sino-optimism while interrogating the existing Sino-pessimism. The paper concludes that China will have a more positive impact in Africa if its activities are driven by an expectation of transformative possibilities called Sino-optimism. The real transformation, however, will come from African leaders choosing their own policies and implementing them, with China only playing a supportive role.

Lina Benabdallah's "China's Peace and Security Strategies in Africa: Building Capacity is Building Peace?" analyses China's diplomatic and military engagement. It focuses on China's security premise and offers a historic analysis of China's Africa strategy. Its approach to security engagement goes beyond the traditional supplying of military arms and hardware to include non-traditional aspects of cooperation such as capacity building programs and investments in human resource development. The analysis is in line with China's 2015 FOCAC policies for assistance to African countries, which includes education, and empowering them to take control of their economic and security needs. Benabdallah proposes a security-development nexus as a framework to understand China's security policies in Africa. This approach attaches security to reducing poverty and improving living conditions. The view that security hinges on successful development guides both China's domestic as well as its foreign policy, which differentiates the way European powers and the U.S. have engaged peace and security issues in Africa. The author notes, however, that there have been contradictions in China's security engagement with Zimbabwe, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other countries. Some analysts have found as in the DRC that Chinese interests have at times coincided with Western interests in support of stabilization and market-driven economic activities.<sup>5</sup>

The second set of papers focuses on the impact of Chinese political, security, and economic engagement in South Sudan, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Zambia. Daniel Large's contribution deepens the security and military discussion of China's engagement with an in-depth analysis of South Sudan. In "China and South Sudan's Civil War, 2013" Large examines China's involvement starting with Sudan from the mid 1990s beginning with the Sino-Sudanese petro-partnership. Large analyzes the changing nature of the relationship and concludes that South Sudan has been the site of an evolving, experimental, and more proactive Chinese political and security engagement in sub-Saharan Africa. The paper finds that China's engagement was dominated by a combination of political and security concerns related to its economic interests and the desire to protect its investments and Chinese citizens. This is in line with President Xi's declaration in 2014: "We should protect China's overseas interests and continue to improve our capacity to provide such protection."<sup>6</sup>

Richard Aidoo's contribution focuses on Chinese engagement in Ghana and the growing anti-Chinese sentiment especially for the Chinese migrants involved in unregulated artisanal gold mining in Ghana called *galamsey*. His "The Political Economy of Galamsey and Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Ghana" captures one aspect of China's expansion into Africa as it searches for

natural resources and its impact on the local and communities, as well as the national level. Aidoo discusses the complexity of these relations that at times have been portrayed in a simplistic way. Rather than showing the situation as Chinese foreigners exploiting African locals, Aidoo exposes the collusion of local traditional rulers and political representatives. In a broader sense the paper mirrors what is happening in many African communities where political actors and local actors play roles that make the majority appear voiceless and powerless.

Claude Kabemba's "China-Democratic Republic of Congo Relations: From a Beneficial to a Developmental Cooperation," explores the relationship between China and the Democratic Republic of Congo and questions the viability of China's "win-win" proposition between unequal partners. Kabemba details the relationship between the two nations starting before the DRC's independence. He analyses the country's history and the economic exploitation that it has suffered by external forces. The author notes the rise in trade relations between the two countries from 1991 to 2014. While there has been a rapid increase in China's imports from the DRC this has not translated into the expected employment for DRC citizens, the author finds. Kabemba also illustrates the disparity in the relationship with examples including the controversial Sicomines deal, a resources-for-infrastructure deal worth \$6 billion. Kabemba argues that, given the DRC's wealth and the state's dysfunctional status and China's strength and aggressiveness in acquiring raw materials, the DRC is incapable of engaging in an equal relationship with China, which is a strong state, militarily, ideologically, and economically: therefore, a "win-win" cooperation between the two countries is not possible. Kabemba suggests that it would be more beneficial for the DRC if China assisted in re-building the state and strengthening its institutions. Kabemba's analysis is useful in looking at state strength and capability. China's economic progress is built on stability and if the same is to be achieved in African countries China would have to play a bigger role in stabilizing, peacekeeping, and democratizing initiatives.

The idea that Africans are neither passive nor powerless in their relationship with China is amplified in Agnes Ngoma Leslie's "Zambia and China: Workers' Protest, Civil Society and the Role of Opposition Politics in Elevating State Engagement." This paper analyzes the plight of workers in Chinese operated investments and the role the opposition political party played in elevating the China-Africa relationship to national and international prominence. Through providing a historical framework for understanding protest in Zambia and showing that this is not simply an anti-Chinese response, the article demonstrates that Zambian workers have historically protested whenever their rights were threatened. Leslie also provides a history of the relationship between China and Zambia and identifies the roles that leaders from both countries have played in dealing with the workers' plight and protecting the larger relationship between the two countries. Like Aidoo's contribution, the article emphasizes the active roles that Africans play in the China-Africa relationship. It suggests that African countries could play greater roles in defining their engagement with China since they bring to the bargaining table important goods that China seeks.

The third section examines Chinese investments and their impact on African societies, commerce, and labor. Perhaps one of the areas that have received the most media attention is the perception that Chinese investments do not provide much employment for Africans. The complaints include low wages, poor working conditions, environmental degradation, lack of technological transfer, and low level skill development. Chinese employers are also accused of bringing a large workforce from China and thus denying African workers much needed employment. Tang Xiaoyang investigates those issues in research conducted on several Chinese companies in seven African countries. He poses the critical question "Does Chinese Employment Benefit Africans? Investigating Chinese Enterprises and their Operations in Africa." Tang's research also contributes to our understanding of the common issues that confront Chinese and African workers, including their motivations, practical occupations, and hopes and ambitions. He takes us into Chinese textile, plastics, and leather manufacturing companies in seven African countries where we are introduced to real people and learn about their daily concerns. The

research findings are important for policy makers who can guide the Chinese entrepreneurs in investing in areas where they can make an impact and at the same time benefit the local populace, thus reducing friction.

Another contribution, which complements Tang's paper, focuses on the role of petty traders in Kampala, Uganda and their contribution to the community. "Chinese Traders In Kampala: Status, Challenges, and Impact on Ugandan Society" by Ward Warmerdam and Meine Pieter van Dijk finds that African leaders are negotiating trade and investment policies to their advantage and not simply allowing Chinese traders to operate without conditions, as widely perceived. The authors found that some countries including Uganda, Botswana, Malawi, and Kenya have imposed firm restrictions that allowed Chinese investors to operate in specific sectors in order to avoid friction with local traders. This trend, which is spreading to other African countries, seems to enhance the local economies rather than competing with them.

The last set of papers examines how the Chinese government is using the media to enhance its image and the perception of Chinese citizens about Africa and how these relate to their country's engagement with the continent. Li Xianjing's "The Image of Africa in China: The Emerging Role of Chinese Social Media" explores how the Chinese population in general perceive Africa and what media sources they use to obtain information about Africa. Li also provides an overview of reporting on Africa in the Chinese traditional media, which explains the dearth of news and frequent stereotypes about Africa in the Chinese media. Realizing the resource base and market that Africa provides for China, he argues that it has become necessary for the Chinese people to be more knowledgeable about the continent. He thus provides an in-depth analysis of Chinese perceptions of Africa and how they use the social media, including WeeChat, to advance their understanding of Africa.

The final paper looks at how China attempts to use media to frame its Africa engagement in a positive light. As has been seen in the foregoing articles Chinese investments impact African societies in various ways, sometimes negatively, thus provoking criticism from Western as well as some local African media accusing China of neocolonialism, racism, and exploitation. Michael Leslie's "The Dragon Shapes its Image: A Study of Chinese Media Influence Strategies in Africa," analyzes China's attempts to influence the media which go back to before the Cold War. To achieve its objective China uses soft power including training journalists and providing equipment and infrastructure for media operations. Chinese companies have also established media operations in Africa such as StarTimes. In addition China has also expanded its own media into Africa including its state-run Chinese Central Television (CCTV), China Radio International (CRI), the Xinhua News Agency, *China Daily*, and the monthly *ChinAfrica*. For example, the Chinese funded China Africa Reporting Project at the University of Witwatersrand aims to improve the quality of reporting around issues related to China and the continent. This article thus complements the others in this issue in exploring the totality of China's engagement in Africa.

## Conclusion

These articles portray the evolving nature of China and Africa relations from wide-ranging perspectives, thus adding to the growing body of scholarship on this topic and the interdisciplinary way of conducting research. They identify important issues unfolding in Africa and to some extent China itself. The range and diversity of the articles help us elucidate the benefits and challenges attached to the China-Africa relations. This also indicates the robust nature of the research across the continent and involving scholars in Africa, China, Europe and the United States. As has been pointed out, China is coherent and strategic in its relationship with Africa including utilizing hard, soft, and smart power. Clearly African countries do not have a unified strategy for engaging with China. Perhaps it would be in the best interest of African countries if they could enhance their agency by developing a more unified and strategic policy on major issues and thus have a more comprehensive strategy on how they engage with China.

## Notes

1 French 2014.

2 FOCAC 2015.

3 Ibid.

4 The articles all originate from papers presented at the University of Florida Center for African Studies conference “China-Africa Relations: Engagement, Investments, and Media Strategies” held in Gainesville, Florida April 9-10, 2015.

5 Curtis 2013.

6 Xi 2014.

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