

Sino-optimism in Africa

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Abstract: Sino-optimism refers to the conviction or expectation that China is a force for good in Africa. There is little doubt that China would like to see Africa succeed. The sense of solidarity with Africa in China's diplomatic thought is quite deep—intrinsic interest underlies China's approach to Africa today, unlike the West's interest, which had been on the decline since the 1990s, and is therefore now partly derivative in nature, a reaction to China's interest in Africa. China's leaders also realize that Africa's economic modernization is in their long-term interest, as it could bolster the nation's soft (and hard) power in Africa and beyond, particularly if they trigger it, or play an important part in the process. This is the first pillar of Sino-optimism, the subjective factor. The second pillar that is supposed to anchor Sino-optimism, the objective factor, does not depend on the preference of decision-makers in Beijing and/or Africa. At the center of this is the logic of capital, which is the same irrespective of who the capitalist is, whether it is the Europeans, the Americans, or the Chinese. The structural distortion in Africa's political economy cannot therefore be simply wished away; in fact, China's increased involvement may deepen the distortion, at least in the short run. In this context, I seek to explore the logic of Sino-optimism in Africa today, its manifestation and its foundation.

Introduction

China-Africa relations is a misleading concept, it is sometimes said, since China is a state, or, at least, a civilization pretending to be a state, while Africa is a miracle of diversity, a conglomerate of formally differentiated, multiple units, with immense variations. This is a valid claim not least because China's economic interactions with different countries can and will have variable impacts. Hazards are always there in perspectives that fuse different levels of analysis, but, I think, in this case they are less consequential than it is often assumed.

Let me use an example from human biology to illustrate the point. If Africa can be likened to a human body and the interactions with China to a form of diet with different types and levels of nutritional values, an extrapolation can certainly be made from the effect of interactions with China (diet) on different organs (states) to its overall effect on the entire body (Africa). Just as what is good or not good for one's kidney or brain will have a corresponding effect on the general condition of the overall body, so will China's interaction with a particular country or region have a parallel effect on the African condition. Thus by this logic, what is good for Kenya is also good for Africa.

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v16/v16i3-4a2.pdf>

What is Sino-optimism?

Jacob Zuma, President of South Africa, said in 2012: “We [Africans] are particularly pleased that in our relationship with China we are equals and that agreements entered into are for mutual gain.”¹ More recently, Xi Jinping, China’s President told African leaders: “China and Africa share mutual needs and complementarities and face a rare opportunity in pursuing development through cooperation.”² The Permanent Representative of Kenya to the United Nations also observed: “The Chinese are putting their money into [African] infrastructure, they are putting their money into manufacturing and they are putting their money into construction...but they are doing this in a manner in which we in Africa have never witnessed before. The terms of engagement have been amazingly generous.”³ Sino-optimism is the anticipation of such transformative possibilities as a consequence of China’s increasing presence in Africa. It is the prevailing mood in Africa today—according a recent Pew Global Survey, “Majorities or pluralities in all of African and Latin American countries surveyed have a positive view of China. Highest praise [for China] can be found in Africa [compared to Latin America].”⁴

The Birth of Sino-optimism

It is perhaps impossible to say when Sino-optimism was born except to surmise that its birth has a dialectical connection with a discourse in the West about rising China.⁵ Sino-optimism emerged in the shadow of the discourse that China was posing a threat in Africa to the West. “How China is Taking Over Africa...and Why We in the West Should be Very Worried,” was, for instance, how a British newspaper sounded the alarm in its headline.⁶ The frame of reference of this discourse was not whether or not China was a force for good in Africa, for Africans, but whether or not China in Africa was a bad thing for the West. Some were convinced that China would be posing a threat in Africa to Western interests. There was indeed a growing popularity of the so-called the China model in Africa among some of Africa’s ruling elites as a realistic alternative to the Western approach.

In any case, increasingly, the promise of the “China model” was beginning to be contrasted with what was regarded as the failed model of neo-liberal capitalism. Congressman Chris Smith, the former chair of the U.S. House of Representatives Sub-Committee on Africa, articulated such a line of argument when he said: “People like Bashir [of Sudan], Mugabe [of Zimbabwe] and so many others love the Chinese model of control and secret police...I am very worried about the influence of their bad human rights and bad governance model is having....”⁷ Sino-optimism in Africa was therefore partly a reaction to a strand of Sino-pessimism that emerged in the West, in which the steadily increasing influence of China in Africa was seen as part and parcel of China’s effort to systematically delegitimize the prevailing neo-liberal order and the authority on which it was based.

Varieties of Sino-optimism

In the discourse about China in Africa, different levels and types of Sino-optimism can be identified.

Vertical Sino-optimism

This is the attractiveness of China to Africa's leaders. It is based on the conviction that China is a partner of and a model for Africa. Some African elites are almost certain that as a partner, China can, and even will, ignite Africa's economic modernization, if it is not doing so already. China is after all buying more from Africa, selling more to Africa, investing more in Africa, and lending more to Africa.⁸

Africa's leaders also see China as a model. The reasoning involved here is, first, that the socio-cultural ideologies and socio-economic condition in China are/were broadly similar to those in many African countries. It follows that what worked in China should or would also work in Africa. In other words, the "China's model" is more relevant to the African condition than the neo-liberal model. As Meles Zenawi, the late Prime Minister of Ethiopia put it: "Chinese transformation disproved the pessimistic attitude that 'if you are poor once, you are likely to be poor forever.'"⁹ The second, and related, reason why China is regarded as a model has more to do with China's continued success in modernizing its economy and lifting hundreds of millions of its people out of poverty in a relatively short period of time. Third, China is viewed as a model because the developmental policies chosen by many governments in Africa are believed to be consistent with those pursued by China. China does not have to try to influence the policies of African governments through its loans, investment, and aid; at least it does not do so actively and openly.

The notion that China is a partner and a model could be separated analytically and in practice. One could admire and emulate China as a model without buying into the idea that China would (have to) be a partner, capable of and committed to igniting economic modernization in Africa. To the extent that China's interests are dynamic and expansive, which they are, it does not indeed automatically follow that the two would even remain compatible indefinitely. China would continue to be a partner of Africa to the extent that it is also in China's own interest to do so, but China could continue to stimulate Africa's effort to modernize its economy even long after it ceases to be Africa's partner. To say this is not any more incorrect than to say Meiji Japan could be a model for Africa's development.¹⁰

Horizontal Sino-optimism

This is the goodwill of ordinary Africans toward China. At least three elements in China's economic diplomacy in Africa are the driving forces behind horizontal Sino-optimism. The first is the emphasis in China's own economic diplomacy on the building of visible and symbolic projects such as dams, conference halls, and roads that are designed not only to deliver services but also produce the "meaning" of solidarity and friendship. China's approach in this regard is sometimes direct and obvious and more subtle at other times. In the summer of 2016, when I was visiting Ethiopian villages with my wife, who happened to be a Japanese, Ethiopian children constantly followed us, affectionately calling her "China, China..."

Second, China's approach emphasizes projects that have tangible and instantaneous effects. These are projects that give ordinary people concrete power of choice: positive freedom. A project that is aimed at building roads and dams is more tangible to ordinary people than one whose goal is promotion of democracy and human rights. The simple observation made by the

President of China Export-Import Bank of China articulates this view: “roads and radios are more urgent needs for Africans than human rights and freedom.”¹¹ Human rights are a neutral freedom—they do not give ordinary Africans the instantaneous and concrete power of choice. This is in any case how the distinction between Western and Chinese aid is viewed by some Sino-optimists in Africa.

The third relevant element in China’s attractiveness arises from sheer human proclivity to empathize with the “Other” under similar circumstances. Chinese expatriate workers are often seen toiling in the least hospitable weather and environmental conditions in Africa. Mindful of this fact, many Africans are seemingly grateful to Chinese worker for rendering their services at great personal risk to themselves. So, this too seems to fuel horizontal Sino-optimism in Africa.

Economic Sino-optimism

This highlights the positive impact of China’s increased demand for raw materials on the global price of primary commodities, which is the main source of foreign exchange for many countries in Africa. Africa could both sell more of these commodities and earn a good price for them. China’s increasing investment in the infrastructure sector similarly sustains economic Sino-optimism.

The opposite number of economic Sino-optimism is, of course, *economic Sino-pessimism*. From this frame of reasoning, China’s growing manufacturing power harms local industries in Africa. Because of the comparative advantage China enjoys, its products will displace locally made goods both at home and abroad. Consequently, this process will steadily force national economies in Africa to specialize in the production of primary commodities permanently—the so-called the problem of primarization.

A related issue to economic Sino-pessimism has to do with China’s aid to Africa. Some observers view China’s aid to Africa as aid with no strings attached to it. Two questions arise. Is it indeed so? And, even if it was so, is it a good thing from the point of view of Africa’s development? The answers given by economic Sino-pessimists to both questions are unequivocal “no.” The explanation includes the following. It is the case, explicitly stated or unstated, that there is something that the donor gets or expects to get when it gives aid to the receiver. What is expected could be either tangible or intangible returns, but there is always something which is expected in return. Particularly in relations among states there is always some understanding that there is no such a thing as a “free lunch” in international relations. Another issue relates to whether an aid with no strings attached is or is not a good thing. Economic Sino-pessimists say it is not a good thing because by definition such aid denotes that the law of inequality governs the giver and the receiver of the aid. Absolute charity is almost meaningless between equals. The fact that one is receiving and the other is giving aid is in itself an admission of at least temporary inequality. So, in the eyes of economic Sino-pessimists, President Zuma of South Africa could not have been more wrong when he asserted that “in our relationship with China we are equals....”

Political Sino-optimism

This is connected to the fact that the rise of China and its growing participation in the global economy have been politically liberating for many countries in Africa. It is said that China provided an alternative to Western economic aid. It provided economic aid to African countries

with no strings attached to it. This element in China's economic diplomacy is also sometimes linked to the principle of non-interference that China espouses. In the same vein, China has also focused on expanding its trade with Africa as an alternative to aid.

The counterpart of political Sino-optimism is *political Sino-pessimism*. From the point of view of political Sino-pessimism, China is undermining a global trend toward democratic governance, supporting regimes in Africa that are regarded to be repressive and violators of human rights. It may be pointed out in passing that critics of China would like to see China in this regard demand from Africa a higher democratic standard than what is practiced by China itself. They nevertheless make generally no issue about the economic engagement of the West with [undemocratic] China. Relatedly, one cannot help but ask why "undemocratic" China is severely criticized when it does business with Bashir's Sudan but "democratic" India is not subjected to similar criticism when it does the same.

The Premise of Sino-optimism

"It is our African brothers that carried us into the United Nations." These words, attributed to Mao Zedong, were uttered after China was admitted to the UN in 1971.¹² Should Africans now say: "it was our Chinese brothers (and sisters) that carried us into the 21st century?" Since the 1990s, China has certainly made possible the end of the steady marginalization of Africa in global political economy by making possible the revival of or even rise in the world demand for (and price of) primary commodities such as agricultural products and minerals. And Africa is undoubtedly better off today because of China's engagement with it. But it would not be incorrect to say that Africa's cheap and abundant natural resources were also behind China's sustained and fast-paced economic growth. Or, put simply, there is a convergence of interest between China and Africa for the time being. Subjectively, Sino-optimism is based on three claims, although objections can be raised for each from a Sino-pessimistic perspective.

Claim 1—China never colonized Africa.

Because China never colonized Africa, it cannot be a new colonial power in the continent. Logically, however, from a Sino-pessimistic perspective one could argue that because China never colonized Africa, it could be tempted to become a colonial power. While colonialism was a bitter experience for the colonized, it was generally beneficial to the colonizer. Otherwise there would never have been colonialism. If so, what would prevent China from at least aspiring to systematically work out a new form of colonial relationship with African countries? There are those who read China's rhetoric of a win-win relationship with Africa in this sense as a form of colonial discourse that is calibrated for the 21st century. For instance, how different is such rhetoric in effect from what the British colonial administrator of Nigeria, Lord Lugard, once stated regarding the nature of economic relationship between Europe and Africa? He said that the relationship was one in which tropical Africa sent its primary commodities to Europe and some of those commodities returned back to Africa "converted into articles for the use and comfort of its people."¹³ If China in the 21st century is cast in the role of Britain in the last century, the articles which are sent back to Africa from China "for the use and comfort of [Africans]" would have to include radios and cellphones.¹⁴

Empirically, too, China's current behaviors in Africa are in some ways similar to those of European powers in Africa in the 19th century and beyond. Look closely, Sino-pessimists would insist, at what China does rather than merely at what its leaders say. Is it not perpetuating a structural distortion that had been introduced to Africa by colonialism and global capitalism?

Claim 2—China supported Africa's national liberation movements (NLM)

It is true China had supported NLM in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s. China also spearheaded one of the major postcolonial economic projects in Africa: the TAZARA railways.¹⁵ China's support for Africa when Africa was in need of support has been both solid and time-tested. The late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was therefore right when he said: "Africa will never forget the historical role played by China in the struggle against colonialism."¹⁶

And yet, Sino-pessimists would argue that China of the 1960s and 1970s is not the same as China of today. The latter resembles or behaves like what Kwame Nkrumah had described as "the neo-colonial powers that turned Africans into the hewers of wood and drawers of water."¹⁷ The structure of China's trade with Africa shows China is increasingly looking like the developed capitalist countries of Europe and North America. In fact, China's share of global GDP has grown dramatically from 4.5 percent in 2000 to 13.4 percent in 2014; the share of China's defense expenditure compared to the other great powers in 2014 was almost equivalent to those of Japan, Germany, Russia and France combined.¹⁸

The bulk of Africa's exports to China are composed of primary commodities and the bulk of China's exports to Africa are manufactured goods. The structure of African economies is not China's creation, of course, but we should not also continue to do the same thing and expect a different result. Sino-pessimists could therefore hear the echo of what Lord Lugard had said in response to accusations by Africans, as suggested above, that Europe was creating an imperial division of labor with a hierarchy of advantages in which Africa produced primary commodities and Europe manufactured value-added products.

Claim 3—China's intentions are different

Chinese leaders often speak about China and Africa as all-weather friends and say their relationship creates a win-win situation for both. In May 2014, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang thus asserted: "China will forever be a reliable friend and true partner of the African people."¹⁹ He added, "China will not pursue a colonialist path or allow colonialism to reappear in Africa."²⁰ In December 2015, China's President Xi Jinping also said: "China and Africa will forever remain good friends, good partners and good brothers."²¹

Although Africa is not the only region where China's leaders affirm that their economic diplomacy is based on a "win-win" formula for all sides, it is mainly Africans who have seemingly embraced China's rhetoric with a deep sense of inner response. This was, for instance, what South Africa's President Zuma said: "We certainly are convinced that China's intention is different [from] that of Europe, which to date continues to intend to influence African countries for [its] own sole benefit."²² The mutual feeling both on the side of China and Africa could be genuine, but they also overestimate the degree of freedom each has over outcome with regard to Africa's economic modernization.

The level of economic exchange between China and Africa has for sure grown by leaps and bounds in recent years, but, to take a Sino-pessimistic tack, the lack of symmetry in the

relationship has also continued. From \$2 billion in 1995 Sino-African trade jumped to \$220 billion in 2014.²³ But, it seems, Africa still needs China more than China needs Africa. After all, in 2014, only about 5 percent of China's global trade was with Africa whereas nearly 17 percent Africa's global trade is with China. Indeed, the bilateral trade between China and South Korea exceeds the trade between China and Africa.²⁴

The Future of Sino-optimism

Sino-optimism is not just a figment of our imagination. True, a mountain of "empirical" facts is sometimes marshaled just to show that there is less in Sino-African relations than meets the eye. In our defense, here perhaps I must paraphrase E. H. Carr. He said that facts speak only when the "observer" calls on them: it is s/he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context. Facts do not speak for themselves.²⁵

If the discourse (in Africa) about the Sino-African relationship lags behind the (actual) Sino-African relationship for the time being, we can expect that they will catch up with one another sooner rather than later. The scope of China's interest, and the intentions of its leaders, in Africa will also change along with its national capabilities—to the extent we could tell.²⁶ China's relatively modest aspirations in Africa today will be supplanted by more expansive ambitions, and as the relationship between China and Africa deepens, their interests, too, can diverge more noticeably. But the adverse effects of such eventuality can be minimized if corrective measures are taken proactively. Such measures, in my view, would have to include a sustained focus on modernizing Africa's agriculture. If Africa embarks on agriculture-led industrialization, with a sustained support from China, Sino-optimism is likely to endure. But even if Africa was to prioritize agricultural transformation in its development strategy, it has to depend on others to implement it. But he who pays the piper, as they say, always calls the tune.

Conclusion

"If [negative] perceptions are left unchallenged, they become a reality," so said Bishop Corletta Vaughn of Detroit, Michigan. Bishop Vaughn uttered these deceptively simple but wise words in December 2015 in the context of American politics.²⁷ Using the same line of reasoning, I think we can say, China will have a more positive impact in Africa if its activities are driven by an expectation of transformative possibilities, what we have called Sino-optimism. Actions acquire meaning through human intentions. Beliefs and discourse constructs reality to some extent. By using a particular form of narrative to describe and explain the relationship between China and Africa, we do not just come to understand it in a certain way but we also create it according to that understanding. However, we should not also completely ignore the logic of capital. The positive intention of China's leaders alone, however genuine and deep they may be, cannot bring about economic transformation in Africa. In the final analysis, for the African condition to improve, it is up to Africa's leaders to make the appropriate policy choice and implement it so far as possible. China (and others) can play a supportive role in the process.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in Hanauer and Morris 2014, p. 10.
- 2 Jinping 2015.
- 3 *Cornell Chronicle*, March 3, 2015. [Online.]
<http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/2015/03/kenyan-ambassador-china-offers-opportunity-africa> [Accessed September 9, 2016].
- 4 <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/06/23/2-views-of-china-and-the-global-balance-of-power/> [Accessed September 17, 2016.]
- 5 In general, we can say, the debate pitted the “Engagers,” those who advocated engagement with China, and the “Adversarians,” those who saw China as an adversary in the making that must be contained by all means. For theoretical analyses of the debates see Friedberg 2005 and Art 2010. For a less theoretical but more accessible discussion of the two schools of thought see Etzioni 2011. There is no consensus about whether or not the strategy of containment or engagement of China is informing US foreign policy today. See Xinbo and Green 2015.
- 6 Malone 2008.
- 7 USHFAC 2011. In fact, it is both misleading and inaccurate to describe the “China model” merely as “bad human rights and bad governance model.” For a more systematic and balanced definition of the “China model” see Bell 2015, especially pp. 179-98.
- 8 “China's trade with African states has grown about ten times in the last decade, with the total value likely to hit \$300 billion this year...China is seeking to raise the amount to \$400 billion by 2020.” http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-11/10/content_22417707.htm [Accessed September 15, 2016.]
- 9 *The Ethiopian Herald*, 23 December 2008. It may be pointed out in passing that the so-called “the Beijing Consensus” neither originated in Beijing nor was there a consensus behind it. China was not the original developmental state and, more fundamentally, it can even be said that China is indeed pursuing the neo-liberal model, with a Chinese characteristics of course. See Steinfeld 2012.
- 10 Nafziger 2006.
- 11 Jakobson 2009, p. 425.
- 12 Hanauer and Morris 2014, p. 7.
- 13 Quoted in Mazrui 1972, p. 298.
- 14 Incidentally, it can also be mentioned that the number of mobile phone users in Africa did increase from 54 million people in 2004 to 600 million in 2015. See Bright and Hruby 2015, p. 69.
- 15 Is the AU Convention Center, which was built in Addis Ababa by a grant from China recently, the 21st Century equivalent of TAZARA? President Xi Jinping (2015) seems to think so: “The TAZARA railway and the Convention Center of the African Union built with Chinese assistance are landmarks of China-Africa friendship.”
- 16 Zenawi 2005, p. 198.
- 17 Nkrumah 1963, p. 4.
- 18 Brooks and Wohlforth 2016, various pages.

- 19 "China Will Not Pursue Colonialist Path in Africa—Chinese Premier," *The Sun*, May 1, 2014. <http://www.remikuti.com/media/16562/china-will-not-pursue-colonial-path-in-africa-chinese-pr.htm> [Accessed September 15, 2016.]
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Jinping 2015.
- 22 Hanauer and Morris 2014, p. 7.
- 23 <http://www.focac.org/eng/zxxx/t1319459.htm> [Accessed December 3, 2015.]
- 24 South Korea-China trade figure for 2013 was \$228 billion. See, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/10/>. The comparative figure for Africa was \$210 billion. See <http://allafrica.com/stories/201404240212.html>. [Accessed April 11, 2015]. In comparison with China's \$220 billion trade with Africa in 2014, its trade with the European Union was 467 billion euros and with the U.S. \$591 billion. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2015-11/10/content_22417707.htm. [Accessed September 15, 2015.]
- 25 Carr 1987, p. 11.
- 26 Rosato 2015.
- 27 *CNN Tonight* with Don Lemon, December 1, 2015. [Live Broadcast.]

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