

REVIEW ESSAY

On a “Distinctive Path of Win-Win Cooperation”? Sino-African Economic Relations in the 21st Century

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Ching K. Lee. 2017. *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 209 pp.

Earl Conteh-Morgan. 2018. *The Sino-African Partnership: A Geopolitical Economy Approach*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc. 246 pp.

Arndt Graf and Azirah Hashim (eds.). 2017. *African-Asian Encounters: New Cooperations and New Dependencies*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 245 pp.

Introduction

“Our next colonizer!” This was the immediate reaction of my Sudanese Ph.D. student neighbor when I introduced the subject of Sino-African relations in our routine exchanges. Late last year South African President Cyril Ramaphosa was under fire when news reached the public that the country was set to receive a R370 billion “gift” from China for its energy supply authority, Eskom. Across the Limpopo in neighboring Zimbabwe, the Chinese are disparagingly referred to as the “Zhing-Zhong” brigade and accused of plundering local resources without regard to their operations’ environmental footprints. The story goes on in many other African countries and beyond. This attitude is reflective of the general public disdain of Chinese presence in Africa.

This, however, is just one side of the story. African political elites have largely embraced Chinese presence with open arms. Former Zimbabwean President, Robert Mugabe represented many in this class when he once declared, “We have turned east, where the sun rises, and given our back to the west, where the sun sets.”¹ For Chinese President Xi Jinping, Africa and China are on a “distinctive Sino-African path of win-win cooperation.”² He added that China has always been “Africa’s good friend, good partner and good brother.”³ Yet, critics see things differently. Like my Sudanese neighbor, they see in Chinese foreign economic policy, an “imperial and predatory agenda” pursued through “a very subtle but deliberate strategy” skillfully deployed “to achieve both geo-strategic leverage and economic penetration.”⁴ The three books under review join many other scholarly, journalistic and public narratives that try to make sense of the complex and dynamic relationship between China and the African continent. As I will show in the rest of the essay, read together the books provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of “the specter of global China.”

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v19/v19i1a6.pdf>

Methodological Reflections

While the three books converge in their focus on Sino-African relations, they differ in their methodological approaches. In his book, *The Sino-African Partnership: A Geopolitical Economy Approach*, Earl Conteh-Morgan approaches the Sino-African relationship from a grand strategic standpoint anchored on a geopolitical and geo-economic conceptual framework. He provides a firm theoretical grounding of the Sino-African relationship. Ching Kwan Lee's *The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa*, on the other hand, adopts an empirical approach. Using ethnography, she places the Zambian experience with Chinese capital at the center of her analysis, adding flesh to Conteh-Morgan's conceptual framework in the specific circumstances of Zambia. Finally, the Arndt Graf and Azirah Hashim edited *African-Asian Encounters: New Cooperations and New Dependencies*, marks a complete departure from the approaches in the other two books in two important ways. First, it broadens coverage beyond Sino-African relations to incorporate other Asian countries' encounters with Africa. Second, it adopts the tradition of area studies where empirical work serves as the entry point into overarching narratives (p. 10). Reading the works together provides a fuller understanding of the different dimensions and nuances of Sino-African relations beyond both "sinophobic" narratives generated from China's competitors in the West and the Chinese President's distinctive path of win-win cooperation.

Sino-African Relations: Unpacking the Conceptual Framework

The cordial relationship between China and Africa dates back to the Cold War period and the era of African struggles for independence, where China was a willing partner in military matters. At the turn of the century, the relationship transitioned from Cold War ideological preoccupations. Conteh-Morgan deploys "a foreign policy theoretical framework predicated on geo-economic and geo-political imperatives as a theoretical lens through which to analyze the new Sino-African relations" (p. 21). Using this approach, he is able to show how the Sino-African relationship is predicated on the mutuality of interests between the two parties. Whereas Africa provides critical resource endowments, markets, and investment outlets, China brings advanced technology, foreign aid in general, and technical assistance (p. 19).

The Chinese have come to the realization that their domestic need for more critical resources requires them to exercise a more geo-economic foreign policy with Africa if they are to enhance their economic security, and sustain their ongoing unprecedented industrial growth (p. 10). In competing with other powers with vested interests in Africa, China's behaviour toward Africa is underlined by adjustment to local and global conditions, restraint, and sensitivity to local and national order (p. 27). For China in the current era, Africa's oil, iron ore, bauxite, and other resources are a prime target, regardless of whether they are located in democratic, democratizing, or authoritarian states (p. 23).

Falk Hartig's chapter, in *African-Asian Encounters*, on "New Sino-African Cooperation in Higher Education" reinforces Conteh-Morgan's point that China uses a multi-pronged approach to penetrate Africa, including the use of cultural diplomacy in the form of Confucius institutes at African universities. Contrary to the framing of such relations as "win-win cooperation" of "equal partners," the institutes, Hartig shows, create new dependencies (p. 82). The China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) platform is also used to

deepen Sino-African ties to counteract the negative discourse and framing of China's intentions in Africa.

While very useful in framing the Sino-African relationship, Conteh-Morgan's book, however, has some glaring weaknesses. First, he glowingly describes the Sino-African relationship as based on China's "non-conditional, and non-patronizing approach to African states" (p. 23), a position which is refuted by Lee. According to Lee, hidden costs of Chinese "concessional loans" such as higher interest rates, smaller grant element, and non-competitive single sourcing, make the so-called interest-free Chinese loans amount to interest-bearing loans (p. 48). Second, Conteh-Morgan's explanation of the West as the only source of "sinophobic" narratives fails to factor in local grievances over how Chinese capital behaves in Africa. Finally, he makes some factual errors. For instance, he refers to UN sanctions on Zimbabwe (p. 59), yet Zimbabwe has not been placed under UN sanctions (it is under European Union and United States of America sanctions).

The "Bolts and Nuts" of Sino-African Relations

While Conteh-Morgan conceptualizes Chinese presence in Africa, in *The Specter of Global China* Lee provides an empirically grounded exposition of the behaviour of Chinese capital in the specific context of Zambia. To achieve this, she makes a comparison between two kinds of capital—Chinese state investment and global private investment—in two industries in Zambia: copper and construction. The comparison is double-layered: varieties of capital (state and private); and two economic sectors (copper mining and construction). To illustrate her point, she departs from rhetoric or statistics to use comparative ethnography of Chinese state capital and global private capital in Zambia's copper and construction industries.

From her embedded ethnographic studies, Lee argues that Chinese state capital can be made a different kind of capital, bringing unique potential and perils to Zambian development, and presenting government and workers with different bargains than global private capital. To arrive at this conclusion, she uses an analytical framework based on "three significant dimensions of capital: logic of accumulation, regimes of labor, and ethos of management" (p. xii). She makes the case that in the case of Zambia, because of its encompassing imperatives Chinese state capital is naturally more open to political negotiation and concession than profit maximizing global private capital, and is therefore likely to be more responsive to African developmental impulses and labor demands.

Lee shows that Chinese state capital, with its peculiar logic of accumulation, production organization, and managerial ethos, offers more room for bargaining. This is influenced by the fact that in addition to the profit motif, state capital serves the interests of a sovereign state while global private capital serves those of its shareholders. And the interests of a sovereign state, as is shown by Conteh-Morgan, transcend purely economic imperatives to encompass geopolitical and strategic considerations. Chinese state capital has to balance the logic of capital and the logic of the state, an encompassing set of imperatives—profit making, extending China's political and diplomatic influence, and gaining source access to strategic minerals as opposed to global private capitals "single-minded pursuit of profit maximization" (p. 28).

The significance of Lee's study lies in that it does not absolve African labour movements and African governments of their responsibility for Africa's failure to benefit from its relationship with China. Comparing Chinese capital's behaviour in copper mining and the construction industry, she shows that the extent of Chinese capital's compromise and

deference to African interests depends on variations in labor's organizational capacity and in elite political vision and will (p. xiii). The centrality of copper to the Zambian economy, the rise of populist politics and resource nationalism, and the existence of a working class with a long history of resistance on the Zambian Copperbelt meant that Chinese capital behaved differently in the copper mining sector compared to the poorly organized and less strategic construction sector.

In the case of mining, the sector is strategic to the Zambian economy, labour is more organized, with a legacy of resistance, and capital is place-bound. On the contrary construction is a nonstrategic sector, characterized by casual labor and footloose capital (p. 25). Whereas in the copper mining sector there is political synergy between the Zambian state and society that emerged during a period of rising commodity prices and resource nationalism, the construction sector is marked by a lack of state strategy and diminished labor organizational capacity (p. 28). Unsurprisingly, Chinese state capital made more compromises to accommodate Zambian state and labor demands in copper mining than in construction.

For Zambia to benefit from her relations with Chinese state capital, Lee argues, two local preconditions must be satisfied: the existence of elite political will and state development strategy. Without them, Chinese state capital can become a perilous proposition as the case of the construction industry illustrates (p. 47). Lee demonstrates that in the construction sector, the Zambian government had not met the Chinese on terms informed by its own development strategy to guide engagement. Instead, Zambian politicians exploit the availability of loans to further their short-term electoral and political gains at the expense of their country's long-term development (p. 47). She makes the important point that, contrary to X Jinping's professed principle of putting friendship first, Chinese state capital is not any friendlier to African interests. What it offers, which distinguishes it from global private capital, is a different kind of bargain that is more sensitive to popular pressure because of its politicized agenda (p. 74). In addition, Chinese state capital's cardinal concern with stable physical production of copper compelled sustainable mining practices in contrast to global private capital's more speculative trader orientation of exchanging copper for profit. This explains why Chinese operations did not stop during the 2008 financial crisis, for it was more concerned about the intrinsic value of the copper than its exchange value.

Beyond China: Broader African-Asian Encounters

The Graf and Hashim book provides a totally different approach. It extends the African-Asian encounter beyond the dominant Sino-African relations. Whereas the other two focus on China, this edited book puts emphasis on "small players" in Asia: South Korea, and the nations of South East Asia. In chapters which discuss Sino-African relations (Chapters 3 and 4), the approach again differs from the other two. Instead of focusing on interactions between states—which they argue may obscure the fact that in China (as well as in many other Asian and African countries) various players and not only the government, are currently engaged in the new interactions between Africa and Asia—they focus on non-state actors. (p. 9). In contrast to Conteh-Morgan's emphasis on "the great players and the grand strategic geopolitical landscape," this edited volume comes from "the tradition of area studies where empirical work serves as the entry point into overarching narratives" (p.10). Interestingly, although approaches differ, the three books reach the same conclusion that

both state-level and non-state actor analyses reveal new dependencies and reinforce power asymmetries between Asia and Africa, and that these remain contested both locally and abroad.

The volume is also important in another respect. Conventional narratives on African-Asian encounters often focus on the activities of Asians in Africa. Chapter 1 of the volume departs from this tradition to offer an analysis of the activities of African students in an Asian country, Malaysia. The chapter recounts the challenges of acceptability that African students faced in Malaysia, and also reveal how African migration to the Asian country was as a result of individual initiative, as opposed to state-level bilateral arrangements. The chapter on Indonesia, on the other hand, is significant in that it historicizes the African-Asian encounter in the context of the 1955 Bandung South-South Cooperation Conference, whose main thrust resonates with the current “win-win” cooperation discourse prevalent in conversations on Sino-African relations or more broadly, African-Asian encounters.

Conclusion

There is no better way of having a comprehensive understanding of the complex Sino-African relationship than reading Conteh-Morgan’s *The Sino-African Partnership*, Lee’s *The Specter of Global China*, and the Graf and Hashim edited *African-Asian Encounters* together. The three books neatly complement each other in presenting the various dimensions of the Sino-African relationship in an unprecedented manner. Whereas the first provides a theoretical basis for understanding this relationship, the second offers an empirically grounded exposition of the actual mechanics of the Sino-African relationship. Finally, the third book extends our appreciation of the relationship beyond the narrow Sino-African narrative to African-Asian encounters encompassing the Malaysia’s, Indonesia’s, and Vietnam’s encounters with Africans, both at home and abroad. Where it covers the Sino-African relationship, the book nuances it by focusing not on country-level analysis like the other two, but on non-state actors. What the three books collectively demonstrate is that beyond the “sinophobic” narratives on Sino-African relations, Africa stills has the potential to wring concessions from Chinese state capital on condition that their engagement is informed by both parties’ developmental imperatives and strategies.

Notes

1 *The Guardian*, 19 April, 2005

2 *Xinhuai*, 3 September, 2018, Full Text of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Speech at opening ceremony of 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Daily Maverick*, 20 September, 2018.

