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Afro-Chinese engagements: infrastructure, land, labour and finance

Introduction

Omolade Adunbi and Bilal Butt

In the last two decades, there has been a profound increase in the interactions and engagements between Africa and China. Many scholars have noted how Africa and China benefit mutually through economic cooperation because of the 'infrastructure-for-resource loans' perspectives (Alves 2013: 207). In this narrative, China extends loans, technical expertise and infrastructure financing for infrastructure construction in exchange for energy and non-fuel minerals (Lee 2015; Alves 2013). However, as Brautigam (2009) and Monson (2009) remind us, China's interests and cooperation are not new – these engagements span over a half-century – and African governments have benefited as much from Chinese investments as have the Chinese themselves. Others have noted that large infrastructure projects typically employ large numbers of Chinese workers and local workers (Lee 2009; Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009; Mohan and Lampert 2013). Wedged within this narrative is a popular discourse in which the interactions between China and Africa can be thought of as neocolonial and as part of the 'new scramble for Africa' (Lee 2006; Lee 2009; Moyo *et al*. 2012).

In this part issue, we build on existing scholarship to situate Africa–China engagements within a different set of discourses on how development projects are the product of complex arrangements of local, state and transnational interests, with various effects and consequences (Escobar 2011). The significance of this part issue to the Africa–China debate can be characterized in three ways. First, it examines the responses and effects of infrastructure financing, foreign direct investment and other neoliberal economic and political practices by both state and non-state actors and institutions. This melding of infrastructural development and resource extraction shapes the practices of a growing network of largely Chinese transnational capital contesting for participation in the spaces of development in Africa. While there has been a great deal of research on how economic liberalization has attracted investors interested in oil, farming and other forms of land-grab practices (see, for example, Southall and Melber 2009;

Omolade Adunbi is an anthropologist and an Associate Professor at the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies (DAAS) and Program in the Environment (Pite) at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His current research explores the growing interest of China in Africa's natural resources and its interrelatedness to infrastructural projects, artisanal refineries and special economic zones. His book *Oil Wealth and Insurgency in Nigeria* (Indiana University Press, 2015) won the Amaury Talbot Prize for African Anthropology. Email: oadunbi@umich.edu

Bilal Butt is a geographer and Associate Professor in the School for Environment and Sustainability at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. His research interests lie in the fields of environment, conflict and development in frontier landscapes. Email: bilalb@umich.edu

Ovadia 2016; Odoom 2017; Rupp 2013; Ferguson 2006), there is comparatively little research on how infrastructure and resource accumulation are becoming prominent modes of cultural and political communication about and contestation against such changes in different African contexts.

Second, this part issue ties historical and contemporary development infrastructures in understudied ways. The articles demonstrate how emerging discourses and practices of Africa–China development affect local economies, environmental politics and cultural production (see, for example, Monson 2009). These discourses and practices are linked to site-specific local politics and realities of uneven development that (re)produce gender, class and ethnic disparities in many countries in Africa. The articles also link the emergence of new political rhetoric to development infrastructures that aim to replace ageing colonial-era infrastructures as a way to 'modernize' the traditional African state. These discourses draw on Western tropes that position Africans as 'underdeveloped' and in need of industrialization. In practice, these forces of industrialization work to displace and dispossess communities from their lands and resources.

Third, the part issue explores how the contemporary responses and effects of neoliberal practices are intimately linked to historical land-use practices and thus become entangled to create new forms of contestation. These articles engage direct analyses of the ways in which the vestiges of colonialism and post-colonial practices coupled with new infrastructural partnerships and investments enact violence in sovereign and frontier spaces. The building of physical infrastructure sites as free trade zones belies the complex social and political relations between local people and the state that have taken place in those sites. Development infrastructures can thus serve to erase local people's histories and can result in violent contestations.

Collectively, these three aspects move us beyond prevailing framings of Africa–China relationships as a 'win–win', 'Africa is rising' or 'Africa is losing' narrative (see, for example, Brautigam 2009; 2011; French 2014; Obeng-Odoom 2015). The articles in this part issue engage with ethnographic field research using interdisciplinary methods of analysis in ways that are different from existing discourses on Africa–China relations. While the emphasis on such relations will likely remain a focus area over the next decade, this part issue aims to re-centre investigations on local and national African contexts to reveal how dialectics on development relations are materialized in very different ways by Africans. Infrastructure development in many African states has not kept up with demographic growth (Alves 2013), and this infrastructural deficit is key to China's engagement with Africa. We have seen that such engagement in itself produces practices that emphasize commodities trading – of oil and strategic minerals, for example. It is this phenomenon – infrastructural deficit in Africa and the premium on commodities – that produces the African component of China's 'go-global' policy, of which the need for a steady supply of key resources is a 'critical dimension' (Alves 2013: 209).

The outcome is the incentivization of Chinese state-owned enterprises to 'go out' – i.e. to go global – through the provision of fiscal incentives such as tax exemptions and financial inducements such as highly subsidized credit lines. Helen Siu's article takes a nuanced approach to the ways in which these infrastructural projects are financed. Siu explores a number of 'high-profile' cases that '[entangle] markets, politics and legal jurisdictions across the global finance landscape' in order to re-examine the historicity of Chinese foreign investments and

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market strategies. She also calls for more nuanced, non-binary analyses of Chinese–African partnerships that examine 'complex and contradictory' human agencies while pointing to the need for anthropological work that focuses on 'cultural codes required by international communities to secure business, to maintain supplies and markets, and to network and enforce contracts'.

Omolade Adunbi examines how free trade zones (FTZs) in Nigeria – sites espoused through neoliberal promises of rapid development and industrialization – are entangled in a 'slippery slope of sovereignty' that is working to displace and dispossess indigenous people of their rights to land, ancestral heritage and resources. Through ethnographic research, Adunbi investigates how differing notions of land ownership circulate within the communities affected by the FTZs. In drawing out the connections between large-scale development and displacement, the article examines how communities employ both the tangible and intangible past to show how contestations over land ownership are reshaping new forms of community history, culture, traditions and notions of sovereignty in a complex society such as Nigeria.

In a different vein, Anita Plummer tracks the use of 'rumour' as a legitimate form of communication that is deployed as 'counter-channels of discourse' and an 'articulation of knowledge' by Kenyans to make sense of Sino-Kenyan labour relations through on-the-ground interviews with Kenyan workers and surveys of new articles and Twitter and blog posts. To Plummer, this popular discourse is not limited to rumours about Chinese workers in the specific case of Kenya but involves the much more complex politics of China's relationship with Kenya's elite and ordinary Kenyans. Plummer interrogates the circulation of rumours about prisoners working in Africa based on the rugged appearance of Chinese construction workers and their military-like uniform, encompassing how such rumours often creep into online debates about the meaning and scope of infrastructure. Plummer situates her argument in a historical reading of labour exploitation in East Africa, and while she acknowledges that the rhetoric of 'mutually beneficial' partnerships between China and Africa is false, she also points to the ways in which both the Chinese and Kenyan governments exploit their workers. It is this important relationship between investments and labour practices that Plummer focuses on. It is important to examine employment patterns when measuring development goals, especially since locally trained workers and managers serve as a primary pipeline through which an effective transfer of knowledge, technology and skills occurs.

Lastly, Elisha Renne traces Nigerian textile mill collaborations with Chinese corporations and historicizes what she considers to be the more mutually beneficial infrastructural alliances between Africa and China. Renne shows how the introduction of neoliberal practices in Nigeria in the 1980s disrupted this mutually beneficial collaboration, one that had created the largest textile industry in the whole of Northern Nigeria. Neoliberal practices, Renne argues, resulted in the devaluation of Nigeria's currency, which made it practically impossible for Nigerian businesses to engage with their foreign counterparts on an equal footing. Additionally, the Chinese–Nigerian textile trade increased following an upsurge in Chinese textile manufacturing in mainland China in the mid-1980s. By the late 1990s, Chinese textile companies had set up offices in Lagos and Kano, while Nigerian traders and businessmen had established offices in Guangzhou, China. The United Nigerian Textiles Limited (UNTL) mill in

Kaduna closed its doors in 2007, although it resumed production in December 2010 with a loan from the Textile Revival Fund. Despite the increased importation of Chinese textiles and infrastructural challenges, United Nigerian Textiles Plc has maintained production of grey cloth in Kaduna, suggesting the continuing possibilities of this Nigerian–Chinese textile-manufacturing collaboration.

By rethinking the centrality of infrastructure in Africa–China relations, this part issue brings to the fore the importance of interrogating the social, cultural, political and economic interactions between Africa and China on the one hand, and Africans and Chinese on the other. In doing this, the part issue shifts attention from infrastructure as a physical 'thing' to infrastructure as inhabited and inscribed with social relations. Here, we see sovereignty not as constitutive of the state alone, but also as inscribed in what we call the sovereignty of dispossession. Similarly, the infrastructure of rumour presents us with different entanglements of labour, culture and state politics. Building a free trade zone is not just about the construction of new manufacturing sites and export-processing areas, but the violence that this enacts on local peoples who have been dispossessed through unclear property rights. In all these articles, a better understanding of the historicity of infrastructure financing and Africa–China mutual collaboration over time is unveiled.

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