

BOOK REVIEW

Anita Plummer. *Kenya's Engagement with China: Discourse, Power, Agency*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2023. xxxv + 244 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$49.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-1-61186-441-0.

Recent literature on the relationship between Africa and China has focused much of its attention on the question of agency. Are Africans merely pawns in an East–West competition for influence in Africa? Passive recipients of Chinese debt-funded infrastructure projects? Or victims of exploitative natural resource grabs? To answer these questions, most scholars have focused at the level of the state—on the formal political institutions and policies that shape China–Africa interactions. This has meant that until now, the voices and views of ordinary Africans have remained out of sight. In Anita Plummer's exciting new book, she challenges these state-centric approaches to agency in a pathbreaking study that upends our prior understanding of China–Africa engagement. Using the example of Kenya, she has made visible the actions and influence of ordinary publics, using innovative sources from social media and from popular protest. She argues persuasively that there is in fact a vibrant and critical counter-discourse in Kenya that has been effective in challenging the Kenyan government and influencing its policies.

The main points of the book are supported by carefully researched case studies, from public diplomacy to Chinese products' impacts on local markets. Her chapter on infrastructure and energy projects is the strongest, highlighting economic and environmental justice movements that have successfully challenged Kenya's policies towards Chinese investments in coal, oil pipelines, transportation, and ports. A chapter on race, labor, and rumor brings important historical context to understanding widespread rumors that Chinese workers in Africa are prisoners. And she documents the anxieties of ordinary Kenyans about their country's increasing indebtedness, including the impact of Chinese loans on their autonomy and sovereignty.

Plummer makes three critical interventions with this book. First, she has listened closely to ordinary Kenyans, reading their posts on social media and paying attention to popular protests and their outcomes. Second, she demonstrates convincingly that counter-discourse does matter—it has led to Kenyan government response and has influenced the state-to-state interactions between Kenya and China. And third, she places her study in the historical context of citizenship in Kenya including both colonial and postcolonial legacies of inequality, justice, sovereignty, and (ultimately) power.

Plummer shows that counter-discourse in Kenya has focused on a critique of the Kenyan state more than of China, as she compares the popular social media and “political improvisation” of the street with the discourses of elites and

government officials. The “netizens” of Kenya claim that the top-down approach to policy of government officials has too often contradicted the tenets and values of Kenya’s own development and growth plans. And China’s presence—too often characterized by a lack of transparency and accountability—has emboldened Kenyan officials to deviate from their own government’s agendas and even their laws, particularly when it comes to the environment.

The case studies on popular protest show the strength of direct action in challenging the relationship between Kenyan elites and Chinese investors in energy and infrastructure. In the case of coal mining, for example, the DeCOA-Lonize movement opposed both mining and burning of coal in Kitui District, gaining media attention and winning a lawsuit against the state in 2012. In Lamu District, residents protested both a coal plant and the deep-water port financed by China, criticizing an approach to development that was out of step with the interests of Kenyans. In counter-discourse and through direct action dissidents posed the question, “development for whom and at what cost?”

Throughout the book, Plummer documents the ways colonial and postcolonial lived experiences of land displacement, forced resettlement and food insecurity constitute a popular memory in which contemporary Chinese investments are framed. Therefore, it is not only the Kenya–China relationship or the actions of Kenya’s state leaders but also the powerful memories they evoke that motivate anti-mining activism, including when it comes to gender and rural women.

The direct quotations from social media platforms cited throughout the book are revelatory. The Twitter hashtag #*tumechoka* (we are tired) used an expression from a popular hip-hop song to express the collective fatigue of ordinary people who are, in the words of one post, “tired of the thieving political class.” Critics of the Chinese-funded Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) wrote on Twitter that it was “utterly ridiculous” and “enabling neocolonialism.” And another, “for any country to get loans from foreign countries, they must demonstrate how they will repay and in it indicate the collateral to be used in case they default on the loan ... that is not wrong. What is sickening is the foolishness of the Kenyan government investing on useless SGR.”

This book will be of great interest to anyone interested in the current engagements between Africa and China, because of the ways it documents the strategies of Kenyan citizens to counter the top-down policies they argue have led to exclusion, inequality, and exploitation. Plummer’s book complicates our understanding of agency and power in Africa–China relations, while also going beyond the East versus West framing of so much of the literature that has made Africa’s ordinary publics invisible. Plummer shows that Kenyans wish to hold their own government officials accountable for managing Kenya’s development assets, not only in the present but also with full awareness of the legacies of past inequality, exploitation, and diminished sovereignty.

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