

REVIEW ARTICLE

China, Africa and Beyond

DANIEL LARGE

*School of Public Policy, Central European University, Nador u. 9,
1051 Budapest, Hungary*

Email: larged@ceu.hu

The Morality of China in Africa: The Middle Kingdom and the Dark Continent edited by STEPHEN CHAN
London: Zed Books, 2013. Pp. 154. £14.99 (pbk)

China–Africa Relations in an Era of Great Transformations edited by LI XING with ABDULKADIR OSMAN FARAH
Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 207. £55.00 (hbk)

China’s Resource Diplomacy in Africa: Powering Development? by MARCUS POWER, GILES MOHAN and MAY TAN-MULLINS
Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. 329. £60.00 (hbk)

China and Africa: A Century of Engagement by DAVID H. SHINN and JOSHUA EISENMAN
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012. Pp. 524. £45.50 (hbk)

Not so long ago, it was common to affirm that China was the most important development in Africa’s politics and international relations since the end of the Cold War. Now, after an upgrade, China is commonly held to be the most important development for Africa in the twenty-first century. In a relatively short period of time – Beijing’s Year of Africa in 2006 was also the year when China’s relations with the continent acquired global visibility thanks in large part to the third Forum on China Africa Cooperation – the theme of China–Africa has been catapulted out of the mostly overlooked margins and into the conspicuous mainstream of all kinds of attention. The tour of Tanzania, South Africa and the Republic of Congo by China’s President Xi Jinping in March 2013 and that of US President Barack Obama to Senegal, South Africa and Tanzania some three months later stimulated even

more attention. It demonstrated the diverse varieties of critical and celebratory interest in media and social media coverage, as well as a growing body of China–Africa films and fiction.

Interest also continues to grow in academic quarters, as these four books demonstrate. *The Morality of China in Africa* is a short, unorthodox book. It is structured around an essay by its editor, Stephen Chan, and reactions to this arranged under the headings ‘Chinese responses’ and ‘African outlooks’. This organising scheme gives the book an open-ended, conversational format. It is playfully subversive, albeit one with serious points to make, principally in its attempt to provide an antidote to popular narratives reducing China’s role to just another round of externally directed exploitation in Africa. *China–Africa Relations in an Era of Great Transformations*, edited by Li Xing with Abdulkadir Osman Farah, is an uneven collection that sets out to examine whether structural change is underway in China and Africa in the context of changing capitalism and ‘a new era of transnational as well as interstate relations.’ (p. 6). Chapters on China–Africa aid and trade, the environment, and Chinese state-owned enterprises are joined by more comparative chapters exploring China’s ‘relational governance’ of Africa and Central Asia; Europe and China in Africa; US and China in Somalia; Brazil and China in Angola; Indian and Chinese soft power in Africa, and South Africa and the BRICS.

Marcus Power, Giles Mohan and May Tan-Mullins provide a more accomplished academic work in *China’s Resource Diplomacy in Africa*. Theoretically oriented but anchored empirically in the cases of Ghana and Angola, this is attuned particularly well to development politics within a global political economy framework. A core aim of the book is uncovering representational practices and discourses that mediate actually existing dynamics of China and Chinese relations with Africa (and the book’s own presentation is well illustrated, with photographs that bring aspects of the research life). It begins with an opening discussion about the geopolitics of representation, in which the notion that Africa is passively involved in a relationship only benefiting China is critiqued. The book goes on to contextualise and thematically explore aspects of relations taking in China’s policies on Africa, China’s economic transformation and implications for Africa, China’s aid diplomacy, African governance and civil society, environmental and geopolitical dimensions.

China and Africa: A Century of Engagement, co-authored by David Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, is an impressively weighty tome. It uses an Africa-wide approach to cover a broad spectrum of history and current subjects,

as well as geographical scope. The book has chapters on history, politics, trade, investment and assistance, military and security, media, education and cultural relations. Its continental frame of reference is matched with, and supplemented by, four chapters arranged according to African regions, each containing short background summaries of bilateral relations between individual states and China. To an opening section setting out key themes, the authors add a concluding chapter featuring 'eight broad predictions about the future of China–Africa relations' (p. 364). As an accessible, judicious, clearly organised and written volume, this is an eminently useful desk reference work and textbook.

These are very different books and approach China–Africa relations in very different ways. There are, nonetheless, a number of shared areas of which three are worth touching on. Cumulatively, these point to a combination of potential in the still-developing area of China–Africa studies but also various persisting tensions.

The first area concerns the varied ways China–Africa relations are historically contextualised. Chan's volume counterposes the historical depth behind current relations against recent alarmist reactions. Africa is situated as one part of a more globalised Chinese engagement; as such, the widespread assumption that Africa of critical importance to China is debunked (p. 36). Overall, this book is more concerned with exploring its stated theme than offering background. The Introduction to *China–Africa Relations in an Era of Great Transformations* endeavours to historicise relations but employs a somewhat uncritical approach and offers an overly simplistic narrative. The linearity of the claim that relations have 'continuously deepened and strengthened' after 1949 and the founding of the PRC (p. 24; and p. 9) is, for example, open to question in the face of the more complex, uncertain and dynamic nature of evolving post-colonial relations. Shinn and Eisenman, by contrast, provide a richer descriptive overview of historical relations, from early links dating to at least the Han Dynasty right up to current debates about China as a development model for Africa. Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins, likewise, historicise relations but also more fully consider the question of the ideological uses to which historical narratives are put today. In this way, and quite rightly, history is much more than a colourful optional backdrop. Instead, it is an essential, integral part of current relations, to be approached critically in a manner befitting the Chinese government's mobilisation of interpreted history as a political resource and history as a factor informing other reactions to China's African role.

A second theme that these books bring out relates to China–Africa relations as an emerging area of academic study. One of the obvious

areas where they contribute stems from the fact that all of these books represent the fruits of collaborations between Africanists and Sinologists of various shades. *The Morality of China in Africa* aims to give voice to those – Africans and Chinese – it considers to have been marginalised in much of the debate so far. *China–Africa Relations in an Era of Great Transformations* features an eclectic range of contributors. *China’s Resource Diplomacy in Africa* is written by a ‘Lusophone Africa expert’, a ‘qualitative environmental researcher of Chinese origin’ and ‘a West Africanist’ (p. 23). *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* is written by a scholar and former American ambassador to Ethiopia and Burkina Faso, and a China specialist respectively; the book is thus presented ‘through the eyes of the Africanist, Sinologist, and policymaker’ (p. 362). In contrasting ways, such collaborative efforts underline the potential of studies combining languages and different area expertise.

In seeking to contribute to the existing literature, these books display different degrees of realised ambition. The Introduction to *China–Africa Relations in an Era of Great Transformations* optimistically speaks of taking ‘the study of China–Africa relations to a new level’ (p. 1). By contrast, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* aims ‘to present the broadest and most comprehensive examination of China–Africa relations’ (p. 15). A few jarring refrains (‘the Africans’) aside, it succeeds in presenting an impressive breadth of coverage, and demonstrates a very thorough, dedicated engagement with the subject. It is a shame, endnotes apart, that no proper reference section is provided; David Shinn has elsewhere compiled an excellent China–Africa bibliography. Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins largely realise their stated aim of analysing ‘the dynamics of China–Africa relations in a different way’ (p. 9). This is partly because of the way their book is situated within, and contributes to, wider debates about the globalised political economy of development in Africa.

Despite making notable contributions, these books re-affirm some of the problems and limits inherent to studies framed in China–Africa terms or, simply put, as relations between a continental-like country and a continent. Of course, the sheer difficulty of combining analysis of the ensemble of actors grouped under the label ‘China’ with the continental abstraction that is Africa is by no means a new problem; the work of George T. Yu, for example, who contributes the Foreword to *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement*, discussed this from the 1960s onwards in terms of China, Africa and Tanzania. Furthermore, and naturally, this is hardly a new problem in African studies per se; China is far from being unique in so far as its relations involve comparable dynamics as Africa’s relations with other external actors. The limitations of framing relations

in China–Africa terms have only been magnified in light of the intensification of relations, and compounded by the acceleration and diversification of coverage. This remains a problem that is difficult to avoid: ‘China’, ‘Africa’, and the two together are necessary shorthand abstractions carrying a certain general, qualified utility. Yet, the underlying reality of complex pluralism behind these labels in the context of dynamic globalising processes suggests that attempts to engage within these parameters run the risk of being prisoners to a limiting vocabulary.

Contrasting approaches to tackling this are evident in these books. The sheer ambition evident in *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* to achieve comprehensiveness is laudable. Inevitably, however, depth is sacrificed. The book’s chapters containing individual African country entries, a kind of go-to reference section, is a handy basic primer on bilateral relations between China and individual states (although an internet resource along these lines might be better suited to updating and revising some of these entries). *China’s Resource Diplomacy in Africa* is framed in China–Africa terms, and features analysis along these lines. In reality, as it states, the book is anchored on the cases of Ghana and Angola, countries with varying resource endowments, state formations and relations with China. It succeeds in getting around the main problem of structural framing through its efforts to disaggregate actors, processes and impacts and to engage theoretical concerns, including those related to capital, race and class. The authors situate themselves in ‘a broadly leftist political economy tradition’ (p. 10). Locating China–Africa in broader global political economy terms, and engaging with theoretical debates, an undoubted strength of the book lies in beginning to correct the way in which China–Africa has generally remained curiously immune to theorising. It signals how further theoretical engagement might be productive, especially when linked to contextually informed, more ethnographic approaches that convey the rich dynamics of these subjects and can situate and connect local specificity with broader contexts.

A third area where these books contribute concerns the changing politics of more complex, multifaceted and consequential relations between different Chinese and African actors. While all, in varying ways, cover the economics of relations, these also explore political issues that work particularly well when undertaken in political economy terms. The centrality of approaching many of these questions in terms of the primacy of China’s domestic centre of political gravity is underscored.

Signalling important questions connected to but going beyond the scope of conventionally narrow resource-based analysis of China’s role

in the continent, one of the more interesting chapters in *China–Africa Relations in an Era of Great Transformations* problematises China’s ‘distinctive normative power’ (Kavalski, p. 49). *The Morality of China in Africa* explores one such far-reaching theme. It recognises exploitation, power asymmetries, a spectrum of problems from macro-controversy to more quotidian micro-tensions, and the vigorous debates these give rise to. Its core concern, however, is to advance and explore the idea that the Chinese government has advanced a ‘romanticized normativity’ (p. xi) and operated a self-ascribed ‘moral economy within Africa’ (p. 145). Beijing, in other words, conducts relations with Africa on the basis of its terms and in terms of its own values, which are broadcast in similarly moral and righteous ways as the West.

This theme is pursued in a different, more rigorous way in *China’s Resource Diplomacy in Africa*. This proceeds ‘not by looking at what critics *think* will happen to Africa’s governance, which was often about seeking to present western aid in the best possible light, but by analyzing what *actually happens*’ (p. 160). This is clearly important. However, it is far from unproblematic. The presentation of a singular critical oppositional discourse, otherwise referred to as ‘the China in Africa discourse’ (p. 265) but also presented in terms of recurring tropes, is hard to square with the greater diversity of views than those allowed for here. These are evident not just in different parts of the African continent but also, in China’s terms, what might be called ‘the West in Africa’ discourses (an instance where, in the same spirit of the book, a more critical Critical Geopolitics would have been apt).

Linked to but going beyond this concern with discourse, the empirical analysis that Power, Mohan and Tan-Mullins offer provides some of the more interesting sections in the book, especially where combined with their conceptual concerns. The chapter entitled ‘Domestic governance, regime stability and African civil society’, for example, explores a range of issues concerning social interactions, identities, networks and relationships involved in Chinese migration to Africa and ‘the emergence of diasporic spaces’ (p. 265). Drawing out the micro-politics embedded in these everyday reactions, this points to the rich texture of various dynamics not always sufficiently recognised or examined by macro mainstream China–Africa coverage. The chapter on ‘The Environmental Implications of China’s Rise in Africa’ is another example of a nice conceptual/empirical synthesis, in this case political ecology, the politics of Chinese business in Africa, and how these are bound up in the internationalisation of China’s environmental governance. Coupled with other themes, notably governance and aid, this is

one of the subjects where the theme of rethinking international development in light of China's apparent growing role in the continent is usefully explicated.

One of the ways in which Shinn and Eisenman contribute is by augmenting analysis of political relations and, in particular, the hitherto comparatively neglected nature and significance of the Communist Party of China's diplomacy in Africa. Their 'Political relations' chapter includes analysis of the methods of China's outreach with political parties in Africa, featuring party exchanges, material support, cadre training, inter-parliamentary and opposition party outreach. Combined, these constitute a multi-stranded set of interlocking relations the Chinese government engages in as it pursues relations with a widening range of political actors in Africa. This now features far more than interstate relations, involving as it does a multi-tiered combination of ruling and opposition political parties, and a wider range of other organised constituencies. This helps to correct the salience of trade-based accounts, or simplistic zero-sum notions about the politics of China–Africa relations in relation to governance issues. An upshot is insights not just into current trends but also the potential future significance of these largely invisible but influential ideational connections. Here, like aspects of *China's Resource Diplomacy in Africa*, there is welcome analysis of dynamics that are often upstaged by the media-friendly political theatre of leaders on red carpets or the concrete indicators of burgeoning relations, exemplified most recently by the China-sponsored African Union's Conference Center in Addis Ababa, which are most often taken as barometers of advancing relations. Attention to less visible dynamics shows the diverse range of other processes underway, from ideational exchange, human resource development, education or language exchanges, which deserve more research. These are important, albeit in not readily obvious ways at this point in time, but appear likely to be more significant in the longer term when translated into politics.

It is premature to fully embrace some of the stronger claims about China's transformative significance in Africa, partly because of the differentiated nature of actors, engagements and impacts that these books unpack and questions about longer-term sustainability that follow. The marked increase in attention to China has only been reinforced by interest in all sorts of other rising phenomena in or involving the African continent: 'Africa rising', the rise of 'emerging powers', the emergence of 'rising powers' and the evolution of the BRICS from acronym into a more substantive actuality featuring South Africa as an apparently risen member of the club. These volumes, in contrasting and varying ways,

demonstrate how the subject is advancing in terms of scholarly treatment and signpost avenues of further inquiry, most notably, that directed by more of a defined Africa-led approach. At the same time, these also underscore some of the continuing tensions in the emerging field of studies about China–Africa relations indicative of the inherent complexity and dynamism of the subject. This looms as a positive invitation for scholarship to do more than follow well-worn paths but, instead, to define and forge new ones, back in historical time as well as the present.