

Decoding the discourse on China in Africa

“We [Africans] are particularly pleased that in our relationship with China we are equals and that agreements entered into are for mutual gain.”¹ This statement was made in 2012 by Mr. Jacob Zuma, president of South Africa. Mr. Zuma’s predecessor, Mr. Thabo Mbeki, had also this to say on the same subject six years earlier: “The potential danger, in terms of the relationship that could be constructed between China and the African continent, would indeed be a replication of that colonial relationship.”² Empirical evidence seems to lend support to the contradictory claims suggested by the two African statesmen: one lauding China for treating Africans like equals and the other virtually implying that China was behaving like a neocolonial power in Africa. We seem not only to welcome such contradictions but even expect them in contemporary discourse.

¹ Quoted in L. Hanauer and L. J. Morris, *Chinese Engagement in Africa: Drivers, Reactions and Implications for US Policy* (Washington, DC: Rand Corporation, 2014), 10.

² Quoted in J. Eisenman, “China-Africa Trade Patterns: Causes and Consequence,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 21, no. 77 (2012): 808.

Why do contradictory claims about China in Africa coexist? This is so partly because the knowledge we acquire from this form of discourse is a social knowledge that is based on judgment and interpretation. No empirical fact could tell us more than what an observer/analyst wants to tell us: what she or he thinks had happened, would happen, and/or ought to happen. In other words, observation and evaluation are inseparable. In the case of the discourse on China-Africa relations, the problem is particularly compounded by the fact that it takes place both at political and intellectual levels. In any case, sometimes it is as though the more one reads about China in Africa—and there are many books to read—the less one knows about it.

It is this growing body of literature and the competing claims that thus cry out for a disciplinary framework, disciplinary in both senses of that term. What are the divergent perspectives about China-Africa relations? Why are they divergent? What are the driving forces behind them? The answers to these questions could provide some of the syllables that we could assemble for forging such a framework.

This think piece was presented at “Making Sense of the China-Africa Relationship: Theoretical Approaches and the Politics of Knowledge,” a conference held on November 18 and 19, 2013, at Yale University, and originally titled “Mapping knowledge about China-Africa relations.”

In this essay, first, we introduce three perspectives—Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism, and Sino-pessimism—in the context of the discourse on China-Africa relations. Then, we single out Sino-optimism, the dominant perspective in Africa today, and closely explore it before we subject it to further scrutiny. After we demonstrate that Sino-optimism is based on faulty premises, we suggest, in closing, a seemingly paradoxical conclusion that, in spite of its premises, Sino-optimism is, from Africa’s standpoint, still worth propagating.

Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism, and Sino-pessimism

The issues surrounding the discourse on China-Africa relationships today include those that pertain to whether China’s stepped-up activities in Africa are a boon for the continent. In this universe of discourse are, on the one hand, “Sino-pessimists,” who see China as exploitative, which is not only already soaking up Africa’s resources in order to fuel its own rapid industrialization, but also is bound to destroy Africa’s development potential in the process. On the other hand, there are “Sino-optimists,” who perceive China as the ultimate savior, able or willing to “develop” Africa. Between the two divergent views are those sitting on the fence for the time being: the “Sino-pragmatists,” who, although less sanguine about the potential outcome of China-Africa relations, are willing to reserve judgment until the dust settles.

These perspectives emerged partly because of contradictions in China’s activities in Africa in recent years—the dualism of China’s policy, which is in turn partly a

reflection of the heterogeneity of African actors. The dualism of China’s policy is reflective of issues that are also far wider than what goes on in Africa itself.

Let us not also forget the inherent nature of perspectives. A perspective by definition not only highlights a certain part of reality to some extent, as we suggested above, but it also simultaneously makes the other part invisible. In other words, since social facts acquire meaning through interpretation and judgment, relative to our place in a society, optimists, pragmatists, and pessimists about the impact of China-Africa relations could all point to relevant empirical evidence. We are not suggesting that empirical facts are not essential for understanding China-Africa relations, but that we should not make a fetish of them. Additionally, as observers/analysts of human affairs of which not only we are a part but also have a vested interest in, we must admit, we will be more capable of transcending the limitations that arise consequently (to the extent that can be done) only if we are aware of them.

China is a relative newcomer to Africa as an aspiring major power, notwithstanding the powerful rhetoric about China as Africa’s all-weather friend. This means that the China-Africa relationship in its newest form has not yet fully crystallized, and that it is far too early to assess the aggregate impacts. Relatedly, China is carefully shaping the environment in which its rise as a major global power is realized and is doing so under a unique constraint imposed on it by a unipolar international system that encourages it to be less forthright about its intentions more generally. It is thus the

interplay in the fluidity of the current state of China-Africa relations—the underlying wishes, hopes, and fears about the future direction and impact of these relationships—that gave rise to the divergent perspectives. In other words, the perspectives reflect the variable possibilities of the outcome of China-Africa relations, which, we must add, are contingent upon factors internal to China, Africa, and the global political economy as a whole.

Although Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism, and Sino-pessimism can be separated analytically, it is often hard to do so in practice. Even in studies that acknowledge the existence of divergent perspectives, a clear statement regarding which one is more sensible is hard to come by. Only rarely do analysts spell out the singular perspective that informs their analysis. This is precisely why we need a set of strategies in our quest for mapping existing social knowledge about China-Africa relations.

For our purpose here we can begin by looking at the ontological commitment of the analyst, which is often reflected in the theme or subject matter of the analysis. To choose or single out a topic for investigation is not a neutral act. What we believe is the “big” question worthy of answering, our research interest, also sometimes reflects where we are located politically, socially, and culturally. It would not be illogical, for example, not to expect a sympathetic reading of China in Africa from a work that is concerned with China’s “recolonization” of Africa, China’s new “scramble” for Africa, or how China “loots” Africa. The theme of analysis could, however, pose a challenge

sometimes if we wish to use it for unmasking the perspective. For instance, if a researcher seeks to show how China is “challenging” Western hegemony in Africa, the challenge could be a good or bad thing in the eyes of the analyst—good if she or he approves of the challenge, and bad if she or he does not. Similarly, would a greater emphasis on Chinese interest in Africa’s “extractive” sectors, to the exclusion of other aspects of the relationship, imply a Sino-pragmatist or Sino-pessimist perspective? By the same token, an analysis that exclusively deals with China’s investment in the “infrastructure” sector in Africa or is about “strategic partnership” between China and Africa is likely to lead to a more optimistic conclusion about the impact of China in Africa than one whose subject matter is China’s “oil diplomacy” in Africa. In short, we can judge the bias of the analyst by the “hypothesis” she or he adopts.

The perspectives of many writers on China-Africa relations, it must be admitted, betray greater subtlety and require digging deeper into the text in order to grasp the fuller implications. Normative commitments are most potent in analysis, especially when they are least explicit. In any case, could we also get clues from the national identity or geographical origin of the analyst? The answer is yes, to some extent, but only if used with care. Not surprisingly, most Chinese analysts seem optimistic about the outcome of China-Africa relations for both sides, as are many Africans. Nonetheless, not all Westerners are Sino-pragmatists or Sino-pessimists, just as not all Africans are Sino-optimists.

The discourse on China-Africa relations can also be classified into problem-solving and critical varieties, with the former focusing on order and stability in the relationship and the latter engaging issues of legitimacy and justice as well. In addition, there seems to be a relationship between ideology and discourse. Let us elaborate. Two themes have been dominant in the history of development discourse in Africa. On the one hand, there was the view held by Marxist and neo-Marxist intellectuals that global capitalism had the propensity to underdevelop Africa and that the solution was for Africa to disengage itself from the world capitalist system. On the other hand, right-leaning intellectuals saw the process of economic exchange between Africa and the West as a positive-sum game, beneficial to both sides, even if the benefit was never equal. A variant—or distant relative—of this paradigm maintained it was just too late to disengage from global capitalism, even if it was desirable to do so. After China's latest arrival in Africa, however, left-leaning intellectuals seem to be reversing their position by advocating Africa's deeper engagement with China and by suggesting that this could accelerate Africa's own development. At least at the moment, there seems to be a correlation between ideology and discourse on China-Africa relations. If one is leftist, one is also likely to be a Sino-optimist.

Dynamics of Sino-optimism in Africa

Sino-optimism is the prevailing mood in Africa today. But we must make a distinction between vertical Sino-optimism, the attractiveness of China to Africa's leaders, and horizontal Sino-optimism, the

attractiveness of China to ordinary Africans. Vertical Sino-optimism is based on the conviction that China is a partner and a model for Africa. With regard to this partnership, Africa's elites are almost certain that China could, and even would, 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. Of course, it could also be argued that China benefits more than Africa from all of these transactions by virtue of its being the stronger party, and, therefore, China is not a partner of Africa any more than other major countries in Europe or North America are. The structural dependency and vulnerability of the African economy have continued even after China's arrival in the continent.

From the point of view of vertical Sino-optimism, Africa's leaders also see China as a model. The reasoning involved here is, first, that socioeconomic conditions 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, China's model of development (the "Beijing consensus") is more relevant to the African condition than the neoliberal model (the "Washington consensus"). One critique of the Beijing consensus is that it neither originated in Beijing, nor is there a consensus behind it. What this means, first, is that China is not the original developmental state, and, second and more fundamentally, there is a sense in which we can say China is indeed pursuing the neoliberal model in its own unique way. Deng Xiaoping was not perhaps suggesting that he was presiding over the

birth of a “new” model of development when he famously said in 1978 that the color of the cat does not matter as long as it catches mice. 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. In other words, China does not have to try to influence the policies of those governments through its loans, investment, and aid.

Let us return to the presumed similarity between the conditions in China and Africa. One response to the claim is simply to argue that the African condition could not be more different. China’s spectacular economic growth in recent years was made possible by a convergence of domestic and external factors. The domestic factors included the 1979 reform, which opened up the economy for business, China’s potentially huge domestic market, its large pool of low-cost and highly disciplined workers, and the strong sense of national purpose that pervades the society. One could also add the positive role played by the Chinese diaspora, including those in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Internationally, it was crucial that there was/is an open trading order for a fast-paced economic growth in China to be set in motion—one that is based on heavy inflow of foreign direct investment and massive export of manufactured goods. China is, therefore, growing because of its internal

attributes and favorable international condition. These are conditions which, unfortunately, cannot be simply replicated in Africa. True, China and some African countries share broad similarities in their political systems and, especially, in the role their respective governments (or ruling parties) play in their national economies. But is it not true that China’s economy is growing rapidly in spite of this shared element, not because of it?

It is also worth pointing out that the notions of China as a partner and as a model could be separated theoretically and practically. 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. In other words, 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.

Horizontal Sino-optimism, the good will of ordinary Africans toward China, is connected to three elements in China’s economic diplomacy in Africa. The first is the emphasis in China’s own 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 to produce the “meaning” of solidarity and friendship. China’s approach in this regard is sometimes direct

and obvious, and sometimes more subtle. Second, China's approach emphasizes projects that are instantaneously tangible in their effect, projects that give ordinary people concrete power of choice. 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 good governance. Horizontal Sino-optimism in this context is the expression of gratitude by ordinary Africans to China for bringing in tangible goods and services that were unavailable to them before. The third relevant element in China's attractiveness arises from the sheer human proclivity to empathize with others under similar circumstances. Chinese expatriate workers are seen often toiling in the least hospitable weather and environmental conditions in Africa. Mindful of this fact, Africans are generally grateful to the Chinese for rendering their services at great personal risk to themselves.

The false premises of Sino-optimism

"It is our African brothers that carried us into the United Nations."³ These words, attributed to Mao Zedong, were uttered after China was admitted to the UN in 1971. Should we Africans now say, "It was our Chinese brothers (and sisters) that carried us into the twenty-first century"? Since the 1990s, China has certainly made possible the end of the steady marginalization of Africa in the 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.

³ Quoted in Hanauer and Morris, *Chinese Engagement in Africa*, 7.

Africa is undoubtedly better off today because of China's engagement with it. It would not be a vulgarization of contemporary history to say that China, too, could not have sustained its economic modernization without Africa's cheap and abundant natural resources. Or, put simply, there is a convergence of interest between China and Africa for the time being. It does not nevertheless follow, contrary to what Sino-optimists say, that this convergence of interest will continue ad infinitum.

We can additionally identify at least three interrelated premises of Sino-optimism that must be interrogated. First, there is the claim that since China never colonized Africa, it would not be a new colonial power. This claim, too, does not stand up to scrutiny. The fact that China never colonized Africa does not, and must not, ipso facto make it immune to (accusations of) neocolonial intention or behavior. After all, the United States, a country which has never had a colony in Africa, is sometimes vulnerable to the charges of neocolonialism in the same way as the former colonial powers. In principle, nothing prevents China from working out, or from trying to work out, a new form of "colonial" relationships with African countries—what may be called "colonialism" with Chinese characteristics. Within the context of this reasoning, China's rhetoric of a "win-win" relationship with Africa could be interpreted as a discourse calibrated for this purpose in our own time. History teaches us that the rhetoric of power sometimes acquires the meaning of benevolence when deployed in a colonial or neocolonial setting.

A parallel can also be drawn between aspects of China's current behaviors in Africa and what European powers had done in the continent in the colonial period and beyond. Through Sino-African economic exchange, that is to say, structural distortions are being perpetuated, distortions that had been introduced by colonialism and global capitalism. The distortions include export bias, in which the production of cash crops is given priority over food crops for local consumption, and urban bias, in which the needs of the countryside are subordinated to the needs of urban population. In the memorable words of James Riley, it may, therefore, be said if a bird walks like a duck and swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, it must be a duck.

Second, Sino-optimists remind us that China supported Africa's national liberation movements. This is true. China supported national liberation movements in Africa in the 1960s and 1970s by equipping them with the soft power of ideology and the hard power of weaponry. In this period, China also spearheaded one of the major postcolonial infrastructural projects in Africa: the TAZARA railways. Over the decades, China has significantly contributed to the primary health sector in Africa as well. In short, China's support for Africa when Africa was in need of support has been both solid and tested by time. But the China of the 1960s and 1970s is not the same as the China of today. The same can be said about Africa. Behaviorally, China today is increasingly looking like the "industrialized areas of the world," which, in Kwame Nkrumah's words, condemned Africans to the role of "the hewers of wood

and drawers of water."⁴ The bulk of Africa's exports to China is primary commodities. The bulk of China's exports to Africa is manufactured goods. The structure of African economies is not China's creation, of course, but the point is one should not continue to do the same thing and expect a different result. The logic of capital is the same irrespective of who is in the driving seat.

The third claim that anchors Sino-optimism is that China's intentions in Africa are different from those of the West. China's leaders often speak about China and Africa as all-weather friends. In May 2014, Chinese premier Li Keqiang asserted that "China will forever be a reliable friend and true partner of the African people." He added, "China will not pursue a colonialist path or allow colonialism to reappear in Africa."⁵ In fairness to China, it must be said, 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. This is a recurrent theme in China's diplomatic thought on Asia and Latin America, too. But it is mainly Africans who have seemingly embraced China's rhetoric with a deep sense of inner response. This was, for instance, what President Jacob Zuma of South Africa said recently: "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

⁴ See K. Nkrumah, "United We Stand," address at the Conference of African Heads of States and Governments (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, May 1963).

⁵ "China Will Not Pursue Colonialist Path in Africa—Chinese Premier," *The Sun*, May 1, 2014, <http://sunnewsonline.com/new/?p=61787>, accessed June 30, 2014.

sole benefit.”⁶ Are we thus witnessing a rebirth of the doctrine of “colonialism by consent”? It may be an exaggeration to refer to the new phenomenon as such, but there is no doubt in my mind that a new concept is needed to capture it.

Even if we take the aforementioned statements by the Chinese premier and the South African president at face value, they still overestimate the extent to which individuals or collectivities could influence outcomes and do so as they wish. We could address this issue perhaps more profitably in relation to the sociological concept of agency defined in terms of intentionality and power.

To the extent China’s intentions are different (read: good), as claimed, China’s role in Africa could be regarded as positively agentic. But, because most human actions are agentic, we should also qualify intentionality for the concept of agency to have a useful meaning. One way of doing so is to limit applicability of the concept only to those actions that are directed at reinterpreting, resisting, or challenging existing structures. China is reinforcing and reproducing the structures.

Even if Chinese and African leaders intend to change the structure of African economies, adding reflexivity to their intention and enhancing their agency, those intentions would only constitute the necessary condition for the effect to occur. And this is where the concept of agency as power takes over from the concept of agency as intention. Agency as power refers

to the extent to which outcome could be controlled and goals could be realized. Africa’s power as agency is limited at least for three reasons. First, African states have not put their houses in order—the problem of the so-called weak states. Second, African states have only a limited power over the range of choices they could make and the level of control they could exercise over the outcome of their relations with China. And, third, even though the level of economic exchange between China and Africa has grown in leaps and bounds in recent years, the lack of symmetry in the relationship has continued. Africa needs China more than China needs Africa.

And yet, it is still wrong to say that China is a wolf in sheep’s clothing in Africa. Such characterization of China is wrong simply because China does not have an unconstrained agentic power in the continent.

China-Africa relations are bound to expand and consolidate, *ceteris paribus*; and more expanded and stronger relations between China and Africa are beneficial to both sides. Because the conditions are simply not conducive at the present time for Africa’s economic takeoff, however, we should not expect economic “miracles” in the continent. Further, it is important to bear in mind that even though there is considerable overlap between China’s and Africa’s interests today, the long term consequences of a China-Africa relationship would be decidedly divergent.

⁶ Quoted in Hanauer and Morris, *Chinese Engagement in Africa*, 7.

Conclusion

The growing and proliferating public and intellectual discourse on China-Africa relations is a good thing for Africa. However, a discourse on this discourse is also needed from time to time, a discourse that is not only designed to induce China's greater involvement and more positive impact in Africa but also a discourse that seeks to unmask the discourse. And the signs are encouraging. Given the role discourse plays in the construction of reality, it is also a good thing that Sino-optimism now prevails in Africa. Social reality is constructed through a concerted action around a belief that a discourse enables, even if that belief is sometimes far removed from reality.