

# The present state of China-Africa scholarship and public discourse

There are many reasons why scholarship, policy, and public discourse on Africa and China's relationship have grown so dramatically in recent years.

First, there is the fact that China-Africa relations have developed very fast in the last decade, as demonstrated by the establishment of FOCAC (the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) in 2000; the China-Africa Beijing Summit in 2006; frequent mutual high-level visits; a white paper on China's Africa policy; rapidly growing trade, investment, projects, scholarships, aid, etc. China now stands as the number one trading partner with Africa, surpassing the United States in 2009. People naturally want to know how this could happen within such a short time, what the essence of these relations is, and what their impacts will be.

Second is China's unique national identity: as a socialist country; with its Communist Party as the long-ruling party; with its different political system and values from the West; with its dual identity as both a

potential superpower and the biggest developing country; and with its being simultaneously a recipient country and aid provider. All in all, the West sees China as something shrouded by mystery and uncertainty.

The West worries about its "cheese" being moved by China. Besides the historical linkages between the West and Africa, the West's influence in the continent is still strong, particularly in the political, cultural, and security domains. The zero-sum thinking will naturally lead to the concern that China's increasing engagement in Africa means that the West is losing its influence in the continent.

Academically speaking, China's rapid reconnecting (China had contact with Africa as early as Zheng He's time hundreds of years ago) with Africa has generated many issues for further study, such as South-South cooperation, new approaches to development aid, cultural clash or integration, industrial cluster development, technical transfer, agricultural and health

*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.*

cooperation, education development, etc. Sino-Africa relations seem to be an ideal field that can not only accommodate all kinds of humanities research disciplines, such as economics, international relations, political development, population and gender study, etc., but is also an area that comprises almost all the elements of contemporary international political and economic relations (cooperation, competition, confrontation, etc.).

From the perspective of Chinese researchers, the driving force behind China's Africa policy is not as simple as mere resource-driven practicalities, as some Western media have described; it is closely related to China's national characteristics and overall diplomatic strategic pursuits. Developing the Sino-Africa relationship is inseparable from the "three necessities" of China's diplomacy. Politically and diplomatically, it is necessary to the promotion of China's international position and an important support factor for China to develop relations with major world powers and necessary in order to establish new South-South cooperative relations with other developing countries; economically, it is necessary to achieve sustainable development of the Chinese economy, crucial for the "going out strategy" of Chinese companies. Finally, it was also necessary and crucial to oppose "Taiwanese secessionism" and achieve the reunification of China (this factor is no longer as important as it used to be in the 1980s and 1990s). These "three necessities" are the three levels of interests that China wants to pursue in Africa.

China's aid to Africa has generated effective results and contributed greatly to Africa's

economic recovery. The reason that there is no aggregate annual figure on aid to Africa released by the Chinese government is quite complex and complicated but not simply due to lack of transparency. Rather, it is due to an indistinct conceptual definition, the difficulty of collecting statistics, the lack of an independent aid agency, the poverty-stricken inland western area in China, and perhaps an unwillingness to disclose the figure due to the still relatively low amount of aid compared to leading Western development agencies.

China's involvement in Africa has generated more concern from the rest of the world than from Africa; however, China has offered Africa an alternative for choosing its development partner and helped Africa to form a united front and speak with one voice.