
Hearts, Minds and Wallets: Lessons from China's Growing Relationship with Africa

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Opinion Paper

Slavery; colonialism; Apartheid; Cold War manipulation; IMF Structural Adjustment; corruption of governments by western corporations; and resource wars fought by white mercenaries: if independent African nations of the 21st Century choose to seek new relationships with non-Western allies, then we should not be puzzled by this development. Nevertheless, Western commentators watch with increasing concern as China's growing political and economic influence makes it an attractive partner for African governments. President Obama's recent trip to China, in the context of global economic turmoil and negotiations surrounding the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, highlights China's ascending international importance. Former presidential special assistant Kenneth Lieberthal notes that, "For the first time in the history of our relationship [with China], global issues are at the top of the agenda" (Johnson, 2009); while lobbyists for American business urge Obama to coordinate an international programme for economic restructuring and green reform (Barbalas, 2009). In comparison, the relationships crystallising between China and various African states frequently go unnoticed by the media; while analysts examining these developments often overreact with warnings of existential threat to Western interests. In examining China's growing influence in Africa, I aim here to counter

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these hysterical predictions, but also highlight necessary lessons the West must learn to keep pace in 21st Century Africa.

Chinese relations with Africa are far from a post-Cold War phenomenon, with fledgling communications beginning over 2000 years ago, and Chinese goods “reaching the Red Sea and the Mediterranean ... as early as the beginning of the Christian era” (Jinyuan, 1984 p. 242). Africa appeared in Chinese maps from the 1300s, and the Ming Dynasty Admiral Zheng Ho undertook three voyages in the early 1400s that made diplomatic contact with states in modern-day Somalia. However, by the 1500s the Ming Dynasty had withdrawn from overseas exploration, and Europeans had entered their own Age of Discovery. The Chinese would not return to Africa until the 20th Century, now as indentured labourers working in the South African mines (Jinyuan, 1984 pp. 241-247). After the Chinese Communist Party consolidated power in 1949, China forged relationships with Africa's anti-colonial movements and newly-independent states. By the 1960s, China was sponsoring infrastructure like sports stadiums, roads, and railways. The TAZARA railway from Tanzania to Zambia was an essential route for independent Southern African governments to escape Apartheid South Africa's economic stranglehold. Throughout the Cold War China provided Africa with technical, financial and medical assistance (Lyman, 2005). 15,000 Chinese doctors treated 180 million African patients since the 1960s (Brookes & Shin, 2006), and today over 900 Chinese doctors still work in Africa. While China's support had political aims: to counter Taiwanese diplomacy, compete with Soviet influence, and challenge Western power (Lyman, 2005); it was also inseparable from an ideological desire to support Africans, “in their struggle to win independence and safeguard their national sovereignty” (Jinyuan, 1984 p. 248).

Today, Chinese influence is obvious on the streets of African cities. In downtown Maputo, Mozambique, you will see the huge Chinese embassy compound, the shiny new Chinese supermarket, the enormous Chinese-funded soccer stadium, and the Chinese construction crews re-surfacing the national highway. Cross the street from the great mosque in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, and you can shop for a range of Chinese foods and domestic goods. Tens of

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thousands of Chinese workers currently live in Angola, employed reconstructing the country after its 27-year-long civil war (“Angolan ‘Mafia Targets Chinese’”, 2009). The Chinese are building roads, de-mining fields, upgrading ports and rehabilitating the railways (“China Tightens Grip”, 2009). Since 2004, China has supplied Angola with US\$12 Billion in soft loans, and Angola has become China’s largest African economic collaborator. The key commodity of interest: oil (Ash, 2007). Indeed, with over US\$100 Billion in annual trade, China has become Africa’s second-biggest trading partner behind the United States; and most of its imports are from oil-rich nations (Simpson, 2009).

Princeton N. Lyman writes that, “China returns to Africa in the 21st century with not only a need for economic resources but with the cash to play the game dramatically and competitively” (2005). But this is not a strategy of nefarious subversion, masked with altruism; China is striking the kind of equitable deals the West should have been making since the late 1800s. Chinese investments are spurring Africa’s highest-ever levels of economic growth. Stephanie Hanson writes that,

the roads, bridges, and dams built by Chinese firms are low cost, good quality, and completed in a fraction of the time such projects usually take in Africa. China also contributes peacekeepers to UN missions across Africa ... and hosts thousands of African workers and students in Chinese universities and training centers (2008).

China is taking Africa seriously. Chinese representatives meet at least one African leader a month. The 2006 China-Africa summit hosted 48 African nations, during China’s ‘Year of Africa’; and 50 African states will be present in 2009. To sweeten the relationship further, in October China cancelled 150 government debts owed by 32 African countries (Lee, 2009). China is winning the hearts and minds of the African people, through their wallets certainly, but also through a respectful understanding that Africa is a continent with a history, and a future beyond poverty and conflict.

Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who is currently overseeing a bold fibre-optic-internet project in his own nation, recently praised China for its engagement and criticised the West's obsession with aid (Blendford, 2009). Mr Kagame told a German newspaper that China provides,

'what Africa needs: investment and money for governments and companies', ... [while] European and American involvement 'has not brought Africa forward'. 'Western firms have to a large extent polluted Africa and they are still doing it' ... 'I would prefer the Western world to invest in Africa rather than handing out development aid' ("China Praised", 2009).

China also recognises that there is more to Africa than oil and minerals. While India is celebrated by Western analysts as the mass-consumer market of the future, Africa duplicated Indian growth rates over the past decade, and has a comparable GDP per capita. Africa's population will rival China's within a few decades, and hundreds of millions of Africans will have buying power similar to the Western middle classes (Lee, 2009).

So what do Western critics say? Brookes and Shin of the conservative American Heritage Foundation have written that,

America and its allies ... are finding that their vision of a prosperous Africa governed by democracies that respect human rights and the rule of law and that embrace free markets is being challenged by the escalating Chinese influence in Africa. ... China rewards its African friends with diplomatic attention and financial and military assistance, exacerbating existing forced dislocations of populations and abetting massive human rights abuses in troubled countries such as Sudan and Zimbabwe. As a consequence, Chinese support for political and economic repression in Africa counters the liberalizing influences of Africa's traditional European and American partners (2006).

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Chinese deals strengthen the dictatorships in Sudan and Zimbabwe? Absolutely true, and of great concern (“Don’t Worry about Killing People”, 2009). Indeed most recently China extended a multibillion dollar oil and mineral deal to Captain Moussa Camara’s tyrannical regime in Guinea, in defiance of European Union sanctions (“China Tightens Grip”, 2009). But extolling Europe and America’s ‘liberalising influence’ necessitates historical amnesia of support for racist white regimes in South Africa and Rhodesia; despotic African rulers, like Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Hastings Banda of Malawi, and Omar Bongo of Gabon; and fratricidal guerrilla groups like UNITA in Angola, and RENAMO in Mozambique. And as David Kang notes, “The United States is highly selective about who we’re moral about ... We support Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia—huge human-rights violators—because we have other strategic interests” (Hanson, 2008). China sells arms to African states? Yes, China now accounts for over 15 percent of arms transfers to the continent (Hanson, 2008). Sudanese troops used Chinese-made helicopters to devastate hundreds of towns and villages (Brookes & Shin, 2006). But the United States continues to dominate the industry, contributing 50% of all arms exports to Africa, while the United Kingdom and France combined still account for 10% of sales (Adusei, 2009).

Criticisms of China’s economic strategies also hold some weight. Experts argue that aid recipients must buy goods and services from companies selected by Chinese officials, and anti-corruption crusaders complain that Chinese regulation is weak (LaFraniere & Grobler, 2009). However, congressional testimony by US Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State in June 2008, asserted that,

there are often exaggerated charges that Chinese firms’ activities ... are coordinated by the Chinese government ... In reality, Chinese firms compete for profitable projects not only with more technologically and politically savvy international firms, but also with each other (Hanson, 2008).

In addition to this more moderate reality, cultures of corruption in Africa have to a large degree been created

through interaction with the West. Morris Szeftel writes that, "Far from arresting the upward spiral of corruption, liberalisation and governance measures imposed by donors ... encouraged the development of new forms of corruption" (2000, p. 288). Because foreign capital dominated domestic economies, and limitations on bureaucracy restricted legitimate employment through the state, "Ruling elites learn[ed] that gate-keeping functions (trade licences, contracts, foreign exchange) bring huge rewards (far greater and with far fewer costs than legitimate business)" (Szeftel, 2000, p. 302). Western corporate interactions with post-Cold War Africa have also often undermined democracy and created conflict, rather than bolster Human Rights and the rule of law. Examples include: Shell's operations in Nigeria, which led to pollution, population displacement, and the murder of activists in Ogoniland ("Shell Settle Nigeria Deaths", 2009); American companies in eastern Congo, such as Cabot Corporation and Vishay Sprague, who sponsored warring factions to secure access to mineral resources (Lobe, 2003); and the scandal surrounding the Dutch firm Trafigura, which dumped toxic waste in Cote d'Ivoire and recently paid almost US\$200 Million in compensation to victims ("Case Profile: Trafigura", 2009). While criticisms of Chinese actions in Africa are certainly valid, the portrayal of China as a bogeyman when compared to the West is far from reality.

What lessons must the West learn to compete effectively with China in Africa? The first is that African governments can no longer just be dictated to - Western states and corporations must provide attractive deals that can compete with Chinese offers. They must facilitate actual economic development rather than mere subsistence, as tends to be the case (Lyman, 2005), and support local institutions of governance rather than undermine them. Secondly, the nature of China's challenge is not only economic and political, it is also social. From free Chinese language lessons in Liberia (Paye-Layleh, 2009), to Chinese medicine and table tennis in the Central African Republic (Simpson, 2009), and a slowly growing number of interracial marriages in Africa and China (Richburg, 2009), cultural interactions between these regions have great potential for development. In addition, while thousands of ordinary

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Chinese see Africa as a world of opportunity where they can move to build new lives, the only westerners to think of Africa this way are usually mining executives, missionaries and mercenaries. China will win the hearts and minds of many Africans who learn about the richness of this non-Western culture, while benefiting from the social infrastructure they have built. While Africans have been saturated with images of Western society, many have long been denied the benefits of it: culture; material consumption; and personal freedoms. To compete culturally, the West must provide the benefits it has always promised.

Thirdly, the West must prepare to engage with the Africa of the future. This is the Africa that has benefited from infrastructure development, has a (at least initially) high economic growth rate, a population comparable to that of China, and is still a provider of strategic oil and mineral supplies. This will require greater investment within Western societies for the study of African history, society and language; and a widespread shift of perception that begins to acknowledge Africa's population as qualitatively equal to that of Europe and North America. Lyman also writes that Western states, "have one more major economic card to play: opening their markets to African agricultural products. The benefit to Africa could dwarf all that China and India together could do for Africa's development" (2005). If the West adopts this approach to Africa now, rather than in the future, it can both help to shape and take advantage of Africa's transition, rather than respond to it from a position of reaction and historical culpability. The West really has no choice. China is already engaging with Africa at this level, and will simply outbid the traditional metropolises with economic development projects and social engagement. The Heritage Foundation advises the US government to, "address these developments in Africa by deftly encouraging democratic processes, economic freedom, and respect for human rights" (Brookes & Shin, 2006). This new path is necessary for the West to remain relevant in the 21st Century.

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