

SECTION 4  
LOOKING FORWARD

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TEN CAVEATS AND ONE SUNRISE  
IN OUR CONTEMPLATION  
OF CHINA AND AFRICA

*Stephen Chan*

This brief chapter is an *aide-mémoire* and not an academic work. It is not strewn with data and footnotes and makes no pretence to be scholarly. There is already a surfeit of poor and tentative scholarship on this issue—which this book seeks to ameliorate and correct—and its other chapters will make plain the latest data. The present *aide-mémoire* stems from my completely accidental involvement as a sort of participant-observer in the very recent diplomatic jostling among Africa, the USA and China. I had no previous sustained track record in published research on China and Africa. My usefulness to various parties lay entirely in the exotica of my being an Africanist who was also Chinese. I should also add that I am an Afrophile, so my usefulness is predisposed. However, exoticism is precisely the hallmark of so much published work on China and Africa, especially in the USA,

as Africanists who are not Sinologists and Sinologists who are not Africanists, and political scientists who are neither, stray as amateurs into fields other than their own. I do not claim immunity from any of this. My Chineseness is diasporic and, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square slaughter, I maintained a boycott against visiting China, despite several invitations, for well over a decade and a half. I am not literate in Chinese and I speak only a rudimentary Cantonese. I admit a large gap in my credentials. Nevertheless, it seems to me that there are at least ten very common misperceptions or misjudgements on China and Africa, and I have taken the liberty of suggesting what these are.

*(i) On a global scale*

The preoccupation with China's expanding economic profile in Africa should not be seen as an isolated and disconnected phenomenon. China is expanding rapidly around the world. It has become one of the world's largest economies, has one of the world's fastest growths in GNP, and is bringing on tap new generations of technologically and electronically skilled personnel. Economic links with Africa could scarcely begin to absorb the restless economic energy emanating from China and, indeed, Africa accounts for only 3 per cent of total annual Chinese world trade. There is growing Chinese foreign direct investment in Africa, and a growing aid profile. However, this growth notwithstanding, the real issue at stake in terms of Western, and especially US, concern is to do with oil flows from Africa to China. These flows clearly service the burgeoning industrial capacity of China and, in due course, this will become even more of a competitive factor in Western manufacturing and trade strategies. This is not, however, the key concern. This concern is indeed future-based. It is not that the US requires African oil now, it doesn't. But it sees a future of US growth in energy demand, and the possibility that African oil will have been 'sewn up' by long-term African commitments to the Chinese—for which the Chinese are now paying in terms of grants and lines of liquidity. The US is concerned about one product and about that product's future market. With that single product out of the equation, there would be no fuss about China and

Africa. There is no 'scramble'. There is a chess-game beginning about a single commodity's future. In other respects, the Chinese global strategy sees far greater importance in expanded trade and other economic links with Europe than with Africa.

*(ii) Disparities within Africa*

Often there are generalized analyses of China and 'Africa'—as if there were relations between two countries, instead of between one and 53; and as if there were only one official characteristic demarcating the relationships. But taking an even slightly closer look at the 3 per cent of Chinese global trade that Africa enjoys, one sees that 20 per cent of that 3 per cent is with South Africa alone. If the South African and Nigerian shares of that trade are combined, the rest of Africa becomes a group of much smaller and even marginal players. There is also an important typology of Chinese actors to be drawn. There are directly official Chinese actors: the Chinese variant of the multinational corporation, with strong Party influences and, sometimes, direction and backing; individual Chinese entrepreneurs, who may (or may not) benefit from a Chinese government incentive scheme, but who take private risks in setting up shop (often literally) in Africa; and the usual bunch of adventurers, chancers and con-men who flood in with any growth of official economic investment. There are also generations of the more individual or 'private' Chinese, including those who chose to stay behind, for example as restaurateurs and herbalists, after projects like the TAZARA Railway. It is true that the Chinese construction methodology is to keep Chinese workers in their own labour and social groups, within their own accommodation, and working to Chinese practices of speed and health and safety; but it is not true that all go home afterwards.

The Chinese diaspora is a peculiar one that requires some sociological investigation; and it differs from country to country. Having said that, it is very often the newer 'privateers' and entrepreneurs who create racial tensions most. Under-briefed and under-educated about Africa, assiduous in Chinese work habits and risk-taking—sometimes blatantly exploitative—Chinese make demands of African workers that can be illegal and demeaning. Moreover, on the 'high street',

when these same private businesses undercut longer-established local ones, often by importing Chinese manufactures that are cheaper than those locally-made, resentment among both workers and competitors grows. The profile of this resentment, and whether it can be corrected, differs again from country to country. There is therefore a need for far greater economic and sociological nuance in discussing the 'Chinese' in Africa. Finally, even in the matter of oil, there are differences in the Chinese profile. The Chinese, for instance, simply are not much good at offshore technology; their expertise is in land-based exploration and exploitation. For extensive offshore work the Chinese need to form partnerships with Western companies. This may indicate greater scope for future cooperation over oil than immediately meets the eye.

*(iii) The vulnerable international base*

It is not as if the Chinese government has an endless well of financial inducements to give to Africa. The international Chinese profile has several component parts and these have great interdependence—with various components under pressure or facing dissatisfaction. Put succinctly, the Chinese would have no capacity for international generosity, no matter what the long-term benefits, if in the short term the extremely favourable balance of trade China enjoys with the US in particular was to cease, or became reversed. International pressures towards de/revaluation of the Chinese currency, trade walls erected by Europe—even the need to invest significant sums in North Korea to keep the 'hermit kingdom' stable and compliant with international norms—all constitute pressure on the short-term largesse which has typified the Chinese approach towards Africa.

*(iv) The vulnerable national base*

For all the Chinese rhetoric of seeking to assist in African development, development in China itself is immensely uneven, and the domestic basis for Chinese prosperity is in fact politically volatile. Chinese leaders go out of their way to 'manage' the domestic situation into an overall national stability—but this requires much effort, and much hope that an astoundingly Western and Walt Rostow-style

'trickle-down' effect will occur quickly enough for dissatisfactions with uneven development to subside. The sheer dishonesties and brutalities of land-grabs, embezzlement and corruption, favouritism, and related vendettas come through clearly even in the coded language and politesse of the People's Assembly—the polite parliament which is voicing genuine concerns and grievances. In addition, the huge Chinese savings rate—which allows money to become available for both national and international purposes—depends upon domestic stability, faith in a financial future, and a sense of growth. One sudden surge of panic withdrawal of savings from banks would transform Chinese financial capacity dramatically; and one even temporary surge in inflation could dent saver confidence. But the economy is manifestly ebbing and flowing from and towards overheating—the booming stock market, for instance, is both a blessing and a curse, as savings are sunk and sometimes lost, and 'returns' are sometimes predicated against creative accounting procedures. The Chinese will have to put a lot more regulation into their financial sector: this might reduce cheating and overheating, but might also reduce confidence.

*(v) Expansion prospects in Africa*

When it comes to the question of oil from Africa, the Chinese in fact face the same future problem as the US. If all the proven oil field production is biased towards the Chinese market, leaving no future spare capacity for the US, that means there is no future spare capacity for the Chinese. This is where the Chinese have stolen a march upon Western interests. They see themselves as competing, not with other states, but with international oil companies. They can directly and immediately, therefore, link public aid packages to commercial resource exploitation—and they are able to do so on a speculative basis. The Chinese, to use unlovely jargon, are prepared to pay (and lose) upfront for 'foothold' and, particularly, for 'upstream acreage'—basically, betting investment against oil deposits not yet fully prospected and proven.

*(vi) Methodology*

None of this is necessarily random. It is coordinated to an extent that Western oil companies cannot match. Moreover, it is not necessarily

accomplished by simple crude pursuit of gain. There is talk of an emerging ‘Shanghai School’—an alternative to thought and methodology in the ‘Washington Consensus’. To an extent, this is hot air, a fanciful Chinese conceit of achieving a model with the same influence as, for example, the ‘Chicago School’ of economics. Yet, the nascent ‘School’ has already attracted disciples and imitators. Indian investment, with Mittal Steel as a lead partner, has used the ‘Chinese’ methodology of aggressive bidding and promises of significant infrastructural investment in Nigeria. Watch out for the Malaysians and, beyond Asia, the Russians. In effect, the ‘Shanghai School’ is a very simple combination of methods that, together, may be seen as a methodology: high-level state-to-state political friendship, conditionality-free lines of finance and liquidity, highly visible aid and infrastructure projects, and a planning foundation for partner-states. Like a fixed-rate mortgage, the Chinese may be factored into planning as a non-volatile trading partner. But it works both ways: the Africans, in Western fears, are locked into China for many years to come; but the Chinese are locked into Africa. So the key omission in the ‘Shanghai’ model is how to deal with African instability and resultant disruptions in supply. Working on a state-to-state basis, for instance, would not make the Chinese any more immune to rebel activities in the Niger Delta than Shell.

*(vii) The advantages and disadvantages of history*

This is where the vaunted Chinese political-historical linkage to Africa has both strengths and weaknesses. There is implicit in the Chinese model, whether termed ‘Shanghai’ or not, two key supportive elements of solidarity. Firstly, the Chinese are not the West, with its history of imperialism and neo-imperialism in both politico-economic domination and exploitation and in terms of imposing political norms such as democracy; secondly, since Bandung, the Chinese have always identified themselves in a very public, philosophical and political, ideological and almost theorized manner (e.g. the so-called Chinese ‘Three World Theory’) as being for Africa and being a developing country not unlike those in Africa. The linkages run deep. Sudan, for instance, was the fourth African state to rec-

ognize the People's Republic of China, and the Chinese have never forgotten this diplomatic debt from their own days of isolation and pariah-statehood. Before liberation, I remember sitting down to eat with officers from Robert Mugabe's guerrilla forces, all of us using chopsticks. They had received their training from Chinese sources, and Mugabe has never forgotten the debt he owes China. Some of his own high-level supporters even say the chaos caused by the farm invasions is simply that moment of transition that Mao sought to accomplish with the Cultural Revolution. But these linkages are fraught with their own destabilizations. They risk becoming prisoners to history. While, for instance, the Chinese parade the doctrine of 'non-interference' over Sudan, the African Union is itself turning towards the new and alternative doctrine of 'non-indifference'—and there is deep concern in Africa, under the surface, about both Sudan and Zimbabwe. It almost seems as if Washington has suddenly woken up, surprised about the extent and depth of political connectedness between China and Africa; but Beijing has barely begun to have its bad dream about the lack of dynamism in its historically-crafted connections.

*(viii) High political weight*

But, insofar as the Chinese remain concerned to play out a model based on the Shanghai School, historical political friendship, and non-interference, they are going for it with a vengeance and, being very good at high-level symbolic political acts, they have thrown their state leaders into the continent. President Hu Jintao has visited Africa five times since 1999. Premier Wen Jiabao has visited three times. This is a direct courtship unmatched by US presidents, even by British prime ministers. And, insofar as the Chinese have something to learn from the West, the end of 2006 Sino-African summit in Beijing was a direct steal from the Francophone-African jamborees in Paris. Red carpets and flatteries really do seem to work.

*(ix) But naiveties are in play*

Having said that, Chinese diplomacy and manoeuvres can be astoundingly naïve. They are established on a state-to-state basis, and

centred on the old Bandung and Non-Aligned doctrine of non-interference, and the Chinese do not seem to know how to react when the government of a state might be about to change. The reaction of the Chinese ambassador to Zambia, during the 2006 Zambian elections, when Michael Sata launched an opposition manifesto hostile to China and seemed momentarily poised to win, was hasty panic and intervention—warning about consequences should Sata both win and enact his anti-Chinese policy. Similarly, the official doctrine of non-interference has become as much dogma as doctrine—so that the slow emergence of an African Union doctrine of ‘non-indifference’ to the internal tragedies of member states has caught the Chinese by surprise. The Chinese would find it embarrassing to be seen as supportive of Khartoum if the African Union were to be visibly non-supportive. The Chinese postures seem also to be based at least in part on research, both in the state academies and in Politburo research arms, that can be astoundingly limited and based on worn assumptions. There is very little actual fieldwork, and ‘evidence’ can be no more than interviews with African officials. Often embassy personnel based in Africa cannot speak either English or French very well, and very seldom do any speak any of the African languages; so they exclude themselves, as it were, from the back-gossip of even official occasions, still more from that of unofficial events where, in any case, Chinese diplomats are conspicuous by their absence. What goes into Chinese risk analysis when it comes to Africa can only be generalized and one-dimensional.

*(x) New and old combinations*

Nevertheless, old doctrines and new needs are propelling the Chinese involvement in Africa. How the new and old combine differs from African state to state. Western governments concerned about the pace of Chinese activities should be mindful that there are huge insecurities and contradictions in the Chinese profile—and huge risks predicated on continuing stability and liquidities being available within China and as a result of Chinese trade with the West. It is not a house of cards; the Chinese don’t play cards anyway; they play



Mahjong—gambling blocks. It is like a house made out of gambling blocks.

*xi) But the Africans are laughing nicely*

Africans are not naïve and should not be patronized with concerns that they are being taken for a ride. Like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, they are rejoicing at last in having options and having suitors. For the Africans it is not as dangerous as trying to play the US off against the Soviets in the old days. But the Chinese provide not only an alternative to the West but also leverage to use in continued dealings with the West. Being courted might be the prelude to being taken seriously and, in a long string of African capitals, this is the true sunrise that the Chinese bring.