

## CONCLUSION 'ALL OVER AFRICA'

*Daniel Large*

'China', it appears, is now 'all over Africa'.<sup>1</sup> It might alternatively be said that this has recently become more apparent to the wider, now-watching world. It is not hard to see why there has been a scramble to engage the latest phase of Chinese engagement in Africa.<sup>2</sup> As the chapters in this volume show, the subject is compelling not only in the African context, where the growing Chinese footprint appears set on making a lasting impact, but also in terms of Africa as a regional dimension of China's rise in world affairs.

The expanding Chinese presence and role in the continent is at the forefront of a broader Asian involvement that, as Alden considers here, has implications for Africa's politics and established relations with external powers. Focus on China in Africa has tended to upstage the involvement of India, Japan and other actors, together with the

---

1 'We [Chinese] are all over Africa now.' Chinese government official quoted in 'China in Africa: just business', *New York Times*, 10 August 2004. Bob Geldof remarked: 'They [Americans] know the Chinese are all over Africa, they are there building the roads, the conference centres and the stadia.' Patrick Wintour, 'We've got the script, now let's make the film', *The Guardian*, 12 March 2005.

2 In light of the widespread, sustained interest catalysed by FOCAC 3, it remains notable that as recently as the 'Year of Africa' in 2005 featuring the G8 Gleneagles Summit, China was not considered seriously as a force in Africa amidst the huge mobilization of different groups under the slogan 'make poverty history'. Tony Blair's Commission for Africa may have included a senior Chinese Africa specialist, but it's report essentially overlooked China and India.

continuing engagement of the more 'traditional' external powers under more competitive political and economic circumstances.<sup>3</sup> In light of this, one question that this book raises is how Africa's growing relations with China are framed. It also demonstrates the importance of disaggregating two general terms that refer to historically rich, diverse and complex entities. Given that growing Chinese relations with Africa are constitutive of and intertwined in globalizing forces, situating China-Africa relations within a global framework offers a more dynamic, multi-layered perspective. It additionally provides one route toward transcending the tendency to represent 'China' and 'Africa' as neatly demarcated spheres, the recourse to overly state-centric analysis or artificial, binary assessments of positive or negative impact.

*An emerging research area*

Research on African and Chinese politics and foreign relations has in the main proceeded without serious overlap and cross-fertilization until relatively recently. Africa has not featured as a mainstream subject in research on Chinese foreign relations, instead tending to be subsumed as part of China's relations with the Third World. In a similar way, and given that China's post-colonial engagement in Africa was in practice less involved than its official rhetoric suggested, China has hitherto not been deemed sufficiently important in the study of African politics and foreign relations to merit dedicated, sustained research. There has also been little in the way of serious or sustained exchanges between research communities in Africa, China or beyond. As Li Anshan has noted, 'African studies in China have been more or less a mystery to Africanists in other parts of the world.'<sup>4</sup>

This volume presents a contribution to an emerging area of research. It provides a snapshot of a dynamic moment in China-Africa relations. The subject has enjoyed unusual prominence since being

3 It wasn't too long ago that North and South Korea were also 'all over Africa'; Aidan Foster-Carter, 'Seoul cleans up in Africa', *Asia Times* 6 September 2006.

4 Li Anshan, 'African Studies in China in the Twentieth Century: A Historiographical Survey', *African Studies Review*, 48, 1 (2005), p. 59.

catalysed by FOCAC 3, with regular media headlines concerning fresh, ground-breaking Chinese deals in different parts of Africa. In many instances, these have yet to be properly followed up on, evoking episodes in China's post-colonial relations with Africa when headline Chinese statements tended to be accepted at face value.<sup>5</sup> However, despite its current salience, the subject remains under-researched. While there are examples to the contrary featured here, indepth research on the empirical detail of China-Africa relations has thus far been comparatively limited. The salience of energy politics and governance concerns is understandable but has rendered other notable aspects in China's increasingly multifaceted role throughout the continent neglected or marginalized (including informal trade flows, the creation of new trading elites amidst thickening transnational economic linkages, the transmission of ideas, questions of gender, race and power, or African roles and presence in China). Linked to this is the relative paucity of Chinese and African perspectives, with the exception of South Africa where the subject has been experienced and considered for some time. It is to be hoped that beyond the first waves of interest, research will develop to become more empirically grounded and theoretically informed.

*Between Chinese 'exceptionalism' and Western convergence in Africa*

The consolidation of China's newly attained position in Africa presents challenges that are at once the ordinary stuff of preserving these interests but also, and more profoundly, negotiating and reassessing its position within the international system. The Chinese government's distinctive mode of conducting its relations with the continent, which might be broadly labeled Chinese 'exceptionalism', is founded in an historically-informed framework and reinforced by official contemporary rhetoric emphasising equality, mutual benefit,

---

5 Hutchison, for example, noted that 'far from having revolution pure and simple as its driving force, China's African policy was pragmatic, some-what cautious and depended for success, like all other nations' foreign policies, on good timing and on good luck.' Alan Hutchison, *China's Africa Revolution* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), p. 106. As a welcome corrective, see *Africa-Asia Confidential* for detailed news and analysis.

sovereignty and non-interference. Chinese diplomacy has operated on a different basis from the more overtly hierarchical power relations of established external powers. It has been mostly successful to date, even to the point where external reactions have problematically suggested that China is somehow immune to the prevailing forces of political and economic gravity in Africa.

This volume illustrates the striking diversity of emerging Chinese activities and interests ranging from Southern Africa to former Lusophone Africa, east Africa or the Horn, and across strategically important cases like South Africa, Angola or Sudan to less prominent but nonetheless revealing cases such as Tanzania, Namibia or Cape Verde. Investment protection amidst burgeoning economic activities has become more important to the Chinese government and companies. In places the expansion and consolidation of Chinese interests appears to entail a logic of deepening political involvement. China's approach has been more than sufficient to confer legitimacy and enable flourishing relations with many African states. However, this has been subject to increasing strain by the growing complexity of ties. One consequence of China's sheer visibility and the fanfare accompanying its ascendancy in Africa is that Beijing faces the challenge of managing the high expectations it has generated and continuing to deliver in Africa, while continuing to achieve development in China. In responding to grievances concerning business practices, environmental impact, increased security threats and demands for protection by Chinese nationals in Africa, the central Chinese government is attempting to direct a diverse array of Chinese actors, over which its ability to exercise control appears to be not as great as widely assumed.<sup>6</sup>

Current relations amount to an emergent phase marked by an evolving set of issues. Greater involvement has already brought unanticipated challenges as different Chinese interests have been exposed to the vagaries of politics in different parts of Africa. Chinese actors are becoming more established in Africa through experience and the progressive deepening of links. This process whereby a range of Chi-

---

6 Bates Gill and James Reilly, 'The Tenuous Hold of China Inc. in Africa', *The Washington Quarterly*, 30, 3 (2007), pp. 37-52.

nese interests become a more normal part of Africa's socio-economic and political life is one likely to erode the popular reputation for exceptionalism China has enjoyed from below. Nonetheless, with China's newly prominent role in Africa rejuvenating debate about development against a backdrop of future geopolitical uncertainty, the importance of maximizing African benefits beyond elites remains a pertinent concern. At the same time as bringing positive dimensions and holding undoubted potential, China's re-engagement also renews enduring questions of power, the constraints on development and Africa's unfavourable, structurally subordinated position in the world economy.

The claim that China's ties with Africa are distinct and substantively different from those of the West is thus more significant than it first appears because it connects with the core of China's identity and nature of its relations with the continent. China today presents mixed images to Africa: it remains a developing country that has also achieved impressive development, and one whose very success is transforming its economy through reform and opening has entailed a process whereby its relations with the rest of the world trajectories China's uncertain status. Today many African states consider linking their economic and political direction to a Chinese future precisely because of its demonstrable accomplishments and the presumed economic path that it is proceeding along. However, the Chinese government's insistence on its exceptional condition – that it will remain a benevolent partner for Africa in a 'win-win' strategic partnership despite the unavoidable hard facts about the nature of its deepening commodity-based trading relationship – places a significant burden on China's foreign policy to ensure that it is conducted in a manner that retains this moral high ground against the backdrop of its evolving commercial and other attendant interests on the continent. Will Beijing be drawn to replicate Western practices, perhaps under the impact of disciplinary constraints as Clapham seems to suggest, or will it endeavour to retain its 'friendship between most unequal equals'<sup>7</sup>

7 As Nyerere once described China-Tanzania relations. Quoted in George T. Yu, *China and Tanzania: A Study in Cooperative Interaction* (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California, 1970), p. 97.

#### CHINA RETURNS TO AFRICA

with African states irrespective of the cost? In this, how far will Western efforts aimed at socializing China as a 'responsible' power in Africa proceed and in what ways will China influence currently prevailing standards? More than any other process, the incremental revision or even the abandonment of exceptionalism will signal the desire to converge with other foreign actors in Africa and, concurrently, the end of the last vestige of Mao's ideological project.