
BOOK REVIEW

Dane Erickson

China in Africa

Edited by Arthur Waldron

Washington D.C.: The Jamestown Foundation, 2008.

In the past decade, the People's Republic of China has made dramatic inroads on the African continent. Many believe China's recent activities in Africa to be the most significant dynamic in international affairs on the continent since the end of the Cold War. Although China has a centuries-long history of ties with Africa, in the decades immediately following the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 these ties were largely motivated by ideology as China moved to support African anti-colonial liberation movements and leaders. In contrast, today's re-emergence of Chinese activities in Africa is driven by economic and political interests.

Economically, the Chinese government has strategically targeted Africa as an emerging economic region that can diversify its portfolio of trade partners and help maintain the impressive annual GDP growth rate of nearly 10 percent China has achieved in recent years. In fact, trade between sub-Saharan Africa and China reached \$107 billion in 2008, up from just \$9 billion in 2001. Often attributed to China's voracious appetite for oil and other raw materials, China has been pursuing partnerships with African resource-rich nations in particular. For example, Chinese investments and partnerships in Angola, the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Sudan have boosted oil production and exports in those countries; today nearly one-third of Chinese oil imports come from African sources.

Nearly as important is China's desire to develop new markets to export its goods to African countries. A majority of African economies now have mounting trade deficits with China. Low-cost Chinese-made goods – ranging from plastic tubs to ubiquitous flip-flop sandals – can be

found throughout the continent. Perhaps the most controversial example is in Southern Africa, where Chinese textile imports have overwhelmed African-owned manufacturers and played a devastating role in the demise of local industry.

Politically, the Chinese government has extolled a natural alliance between the continent with the most developing countries and the world's most populous developing country. China has sought diplomatic allies in Africa for support of the "One China" policy as well as other issues within the international political arena. Many African countries have switched their allegiance back and forth between the mainland and Taiwan over the years, though recent efforts by the PRC in the form of enticing aid, loans, and preferential trade agreements have meant that today 49 of the 53 countries in Africa have diplomatic ties with China at the expense of Taiwan. Within Africa, many observers worry that stronger ties with China could have long-term negative implications for progress on human rights, environmental protection, and governance, given China's own track record on such issues.

In the last few years, scholars and policy makers have scrambled to keep up with the rapid pace of these developments as growing interest worldwide has created an insatiable demand for informed analysis. Is China a neo-colonialist or an equal partner in development in Africa? Will the Chinese soon be the most influential outside power in Africa or is the extent of their presence overplayed? What are the implications for other actors and the international community? In only the last two years, the number of relevant books in English grappling with these questions has increased from just a couple to over a dozen. The Jamestown Foundation, a non-profit think tank in Washington D.C. with a reputation for solid – if conservative – research and analysis on China, is one organization that has closely followed China-Africa affairs and contributed to the international dialogue on the topic.

In December of 2008, the Jamestown Foundation published *China in Africa*, edited by Arthur Waldron, a Jamestown Foundation trustee and professor of international relations and history at the University of Pennsylvania. *China in Africa* is a compilation of essays previously published by Jamestown from 2004 to 2008 in its bi-weekly journal *China Brief* that have been updated and edited for publication in the book. Designed as a "reference tool" (Waldron 2008, xxv) for the policy-making community, it provides helpful insight into the unfolding events within China-Africa relations. The contributors to the volume include 16 well respected analysts and

scholars, and although they almost uniformly represent Western viewpoints, one of the strengths of the book is the relative diversity of perspectives and opinions of Chinese activity presented by the various essays.

The volume distinguishes itself from other recent China-Africa books through a policy-oriented approach in format, style, and content. It begins with a 20-page chronological outline of all the major events in China-Africa relations, beginning with the voyage of Admiral Zheng He to the coast of East Africa in the 15th century and ending with the \$5 billion contract the China National Petroleum Corporation signed with Niger in June of 2008. The essays written by the contributors are more succinct with less historical and overall context than other books on the same topic (e.g. *China into Africa*, a collection of articles published earlier in 2008 and edited by Robert Rotberg of Harvard University). The Jamestown Foundation may offer the most efficient and accessible book in the field for interested parties to quickly come up to speed on the underlying drivers, the current state of affairs of Chinese involvement in various countries, and the perceived benefits and drawbacks for Africans and the international community.

Organized into three major sections, the balance of both thematic and geographic-based essays provides the reader a sense of both the breadth and depth of Chinese involvement throughout Africa. The first section on “Chinese Soft and Hard Power” addresses the issue of whether Chinese influence is taking over the continent. But contributors Susan Puska and Mauro De Lorenzo remind us otherwise. Puska provides solid reasoning that Chinese military influence in Africa, although increasing its role in peacekeeping operations, is still relatively minor and need not be seen in terms of “a confrontational competition” (Waldron 2008, 29) with the United States. More broadly, De Lorenzo states that while the attention of the world has recently been drawn to the China-Africa relations, “the intensity of the debate has not always been proportional to the actual extent of China’s role on the continent” (Waldron 2008, 22). Indeed, many other countries in Europe, Asia, and the Americas have also taken an increased interest in Africa in recent years. For example, in 2006 22 percent of the United States’ imported oil came from Africa, up from 15 percent the year before.

The second section, although brief, is a well-conceived discussion on “Energy and Arms Sales,” both of which have raised much controversy in recent years. Ian Taylor provides a thoughtful and detailed analysis of Chinese arms sales in Africa, explaining the intricacies of the politics and business aspects within China as well as touching on the domestic im-

plications for buyers such as Sudan, Zimbabwe, and Liberia. In terms of energy, Wenrang Jiang notes that China has been forced to look elsewhere to meet its energy needs ever since it became a net petroleum importer in 1993. John C. K. Daly writes that the “less mainstream but perhaps more significant issue for Sino-African relations” (Waldron 2008, 45) is China’s great interest in Africa’s rich mineral resources, which are as important to economic growth as fuel. Beijing sees South Africa in particular as a “mineralogical treasure house” (Waldron 2008, 46) but also has increased its presence in Zambia and other countries in search of metals such as copper, aluminum, and iron ore.

The final section on “Country/Region Specific Relations,” appropriately the most substantial section in the book, is arguably the most important as well. Although it is helpful to consider continent-wide trends, the true impact of Chinese involvement in Africa is determined on a country-to-country level, where the details of specific agreements are negotiated and locals feel the Chinese impact in their daily lives. China’s strong ties with Zimbabwe, for example, date back to its support of Robert Mugabe before he took power in 1980, and Joshua Eisenman provides an excellent overview of the historical, economic, diplomatic and military aspects of the bilateral relationship. Sudan and China’s influence with the Khartoum regime is another intriguing topic. Yitzhak Shichor details how ties are strongly grounded in oil exploration and economic opportunities for both sides but have become more complex and weighty in light of the humanitarian crisis that has plagued the Darfur region. Perhaps most interestingly, Shichor discusses the fact that the Chinese government, while publicly maintaining its policy of “non-interference” in the domestic affairs of other nations, has subtly put pressure on Khartoum to improve the situation in Darfur as well as accept a hybrid AU-UN peacekeeping force.

In spite of the stated successes of the book, two aspects remain puzzling. The first is the omission of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) within the country-specific essays. In 2007, the DRC signed a loan agreement with China now estimated to be worth \$9 billion – the largest Chinese government-backed agreement in Africa to date. Many consider Chinese-Congolese relations to be one of the new important topics within the field of China-Africa relations because of the sheer size of the loan, the implications for a large and strategic country just emerging from the world’s most deadly conflict since World War II (since 1998, 5.4 million people have died in DRC as a result of the war), the vast amount of time and money the UN and international community have invested in the

DRC to improve political accountability and macroeconomic stability, and the potential profit in minerals Chinese partners stand to gain in the deal. Because of the book's recent release date and the dearth of current publications on the topic, one would expect more commentary on the loan's implications for both nations as well as China's overall strategy on the continent.

Second, although the book contains a diverse set of viewpoints about the positive and negative implications of Chinese actions in Africa, Waldron's introduction seems overly critical and suspicious of Chinese motivations. For example, he contends that Chinese politically strategic ambitions supersede those "of economic origin" (Waldron 2008, 7) as the true driver of Chinese actions in Africa. He suggests that China's main preoccupation is trying to expand its network of allies and geographic strongholds in order to balance against the worldwide trend of "bandwagoning with the U.S." (Waldron 2008, 7).

During a conference in May of 2009 in Washington D.C. commemorating the release of the book, Waldron took the opportunity to expand on this view. He proposed that China's grand strategy is to create an international political climate that is not threatening to its own system of authoritarianism. In essence, by creating stronger ties and allies with nations in Africa and other parts of the world, China can better resist democracy promotion and political coercion by the United States and other Western powers.

As Waldron readily admits, this is in direct contrast to most Chinese experts, who maintain that domestic economic growth, procuring resources and expanding markets abroad to fuel that growth, are among the top priorities for the Communist party. Although political interests in foreign policy are important, the past decades of reform in China have shown that, with the exception of Taiwan, they clearly take a back seat to economic interests.

These two issues notwithstanding, this slim volume hits the mark as a "reference tool" for policy makers interested in the topic. Although not exhaustive and written from a Western perspective for a Western audience, it is a useful contribution to understanding the ever-evolving and interesting story of China's involvement in Africa.