

Preface

The topic of China in Africa evokes emotions; indeed, it is an emotional issue and emotions are about feelings. The time has come to acknowledge the importance of feelings in helping to explain the phenomenon, which is why this book includes a collection of stakeholder perspectives that are from the heart. While the number of books being written on the subject of China in Africa is growing daily, many include the dispassionate views of “talking heads.” This book also includes “talking hearts.”

Essayists speak passionately about their personal backgrounds and about their work and lives in Africa and China, which conditions and informs their perspectives. Far from suggesting that they know the answers, many are musing and pondering out loud searching for answers. More questions are raised than answers given, but questions are important as they help form a basis for future conversations.

From many perspectives, the relationships of China in Africa are veiled in mystery and secrets. Are the Chinese trying to take over Africa, are they buying up all of the available land in Africa, are they in it just to extract oil and mineral resources? What are they doing, why are they doing it, how are they doing it, and how can I be a part of it? Importantly, how does China’s approach differ from that of other development partners?

Collectively, the Europeans, Indians, Lebanese, and the U.S. have been in Africa for centuries yet one can walk into any living room in Africa, Europe, and the U.S. and the main topic of conversation among those who care about Africa’s development will invariably be about China in Africa. Why?

Indeed, something different is happening with the Chinese in Africa, something that is profound, game changing, and everlasting. Is it a good thing or a bad thing?

In fact, it is complicated. Africa’s problems are not simple and neither are the answers. “Rome, indeed China, was not built in a day.”

There are many perspectives on the *modus operandi* and impact of China in Africa and this book captures as many as possible, especially of African and African Diaspora stakeholders whose voices are not always raised in the discussion.

Some perspectives are positive and some are negative, but all acknowledge that with the Chinese a new day is dawning in Africa.

After reading the hundreds of pages of the perspectives shared one big “take away” message is that it is not so much about *what* is being done, but about *how* it is being done that accounts for the difference in the Chinese approach.

The Chinese introduced a new element into the equation: human feelings. While everyone in the development community easily talks about human rights, few talk about human feelings—and

there are a lot of human feelings involved in the China-Africa relationship. Pride, prejudice, respect, humility, solidarity, complimentary—top the list.

When the Chinese invited African leaders to China *en masse* to roll out its Africa strategy, and treated African leaders with the respect for which they longed, it was a game changer. When the Chinese could say, “My brothers, we have both been through a lot and in the dark times we supported you and you supported us—now, let’s build on our common bonds,” it resonated. When China could hold its head high and say, “We never called you those bad names; we don’t wish to dictate your development path, we simply want to do business,” that also resonated.

The positive reaction to this by African leaders has been perceived by many in the development community as a mere desire by African leaders to avoid Western conditionalities and good governance, but while that might be true in some cases, it doesn’t tell the whole story. The bigger story is that Africans have been emotionally wounded and their leaders have oftentimes been powerless to assert themselves. They are poor and they are down, but they are not out, thanks in no small measure to the Chinese. In their relationships with China they have found a powerful partner who is powerful enough to help them chart a new course.

While many question the course, some going so far as to suggest that it will lead to more debt and to a new form of colonialization, African leaders are ready to go down the road with the Chinese and see where it leads. After all, what do they have to lose? After decades of doing it the way the development institutions have dictated, what do they have to show for it? They have rules, but no roads.

When Africans look at China what do they see? They see success. When they look at what the Chinese have accomplished in Africa thus far, they see both success and storms brewing. On the positive side of the ledger, the Chinese are building infrastructure at lower costs in shorter timeframes; they are also building the projects that the Africans have prioritized; and their involvement in their extractive industries and economies have given them an alternative buyer and has caused the world to have a second look at Africa.

On the negative side of the ledger, they see that Chinese businesses are moving into their countries in unprecedented numbers and are “out-competing” local businesses. Moreover, they see that their institutions lack the capacity to handle the involvement of the Chinese in their economies. African institutions from customs to immigration, environment, standards, and labor, often do not have the technical capacity to effectively control, regulate, and monitor Chinese private actors. Furthermore, African private businesses lack access to financing and other inputs that are required to be able to effectively compete against Chinese businesses.

This is a conundrum. On the one hand, China’s engagement in Africa as a development partner has brought so many good things, but on the other, Chinese private actors are causing major disruptions in the economy.

This is where another human emotion is evoked: Prayer. Everyone is praying that it all works out. Right now, the train is moving at lightning speed and no one can jump off. The prayer is that just as China came through its many difficulties after the Cultural Revolution, perhaps with its

wisdom somewhere down the road the problems in its relationship with Africa can be worked out. While the precise formula for the solution is not known, ingredients will probably include more controls and restraint on the Chinese side and more capacity building on the African side.

The sign posts are positive despite some turbulence. The China Africa relationship is strong and is not just based on deeds of today or yesterday; there are real connections between the people that go beyond business. For instance, Chinese and Africans hold similar views about the interactions of the forces of nature and society, respect for ancestors, worldly understandings of life, and concepts of healing based on holistic concepts of restoring balance and social harmony. In the cultures of both traditions, sacred mountains, rivers and forest sites are incorporated in the creeds of co-existence. Elements of continuity and change in their communities are incorporated with rituals, festivals, cultural performances and community events that summon the symbolic participation of ancestors, elders, healers and representatives of shared culture and history.

For the Chinese, such vital forces and viewpoints are incorporated along the concepts of “Yin and Yang,” which connote complementary duality of dynamic interactions. In contrast to the Western understanding of polarized opposition, for the Chinese, such forces are interlinked whereby some are associated more with “Yin” than with “Yang,” but both are always present vital cosmic and personal stability.

The hope and the prayer is that somehow the “Yin and Yang” of the China Africa relationship balances out.

[yin symbol]

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