



COVER NOTE

China Special Issue

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So-called “China-Africa relations” is an increasingly influential geopolitical event with far-reaching consequences for global development outcomes and an exciting multidisciplinary academic discipline. It is currently, however, largely dominated by non-African views analysing the relationships benefits, costs, and risks for Africa in both academic and policy forums. Several key gaps within this the growing body of academic literature are easily identifiable. Firstly, current research often generalises on China in ‘Africa’ as a whole, drawing broad continent-wide generalisations based on limited evidence; or remains focussed on a few (in)famous case study countries, such as Sudan, DRC, Ethiopia, Angola, and Nigeria. A *regional* analysis of China’s role and impacts, and interesting less-known country case studies are missed. Secondly, it takes a more ‘macro’ approach, looking at major Chinese private or state players (Huawei, CNOOC, EXIM Bank etc); or adopts a ‘micro’ ethnographic study looking at interpersonal dynamics in a particular factory or agriculture demonstration centre etc. A massive amount of medium sized actors and broader localised impacts are missed.

Thirdly, it is either overly ‘Western-centric’, in authorship and analysis, which – at least initially - was overly

hysterical about the ‘China Threat’ and ‘neo-colonial’ exploits etc; or is more ‘China-centric’, seeking to dispel some of the myths and hypocrisies present in the western approach. An Africa-centric, Africa-produced approach is distinctly lacking in the most typically oft-referenced journals and sources. Fourthly, it often takes a state centric approach, mimicking somewhat both Western and Chinese engagement with Africa (and international relations as a whole) which focuses on engaging position-based state leaders as supposed representatives of their country’s people. This lacks critical insight and engagement with the locally driven state, nation and peace-building processes occurring across Africa both within and outside traditional state-based structures, and China’s complex, nuanced role in those processes therein. And finally, it tends to attribute agency to China and Chinese actors only; and when discussing African agency typically focusses on small, local examples (such as market traders sourcing goods from China). Interesting and far-reaching examples of African agency from national and regional actors, leaders and locals is missing from the analysis.

This is the first in what is to be a series of Special Issues that begins to address some of these gaps and challenges

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around so-called 'China-Africa relations', with a particular focus on understanding the nature of African agency within the relationship and giving voice to African scholars' reflections on dynamics. Our use of 'so-called' China-Africa relations here is deliberate. Alden and Large have identified the different variations and importance of alternative arrangements to the "China-

The arguably semantic but ultimately important 'Africa-China' moniker is used here deliberately for this first Special Issue on 'Leadership and Agency within Africa-China Relations', to symbolically represent and shift the discussion to Africa and Africans being the starting point of deliberations and discussions. This terminology has not been enforced onto all contributors. China-Africa relations has become so engrained into the literature as to arguably be an entirely new academic discipline in its own right (or as a distinct sub-set of areas studies), covering the politics, societal, economic, security, geographical etc. aspect of relations. Authors have been free to choose how they frame and situate their own work within this increasing canon. We chose not to spend focus and time on this titling debate within this Special Issue beyond the brief discussion here, although it may be engaged with more fully in future Issues. If Africa-China, why not Uganda-China, Nigeria-China, CAR-China etc? Or at least East Africa-China, West Africa-China etc? But we did feel it was important to frame the issue itself clearly as 'Africa-China' work, and to acknowledge the complexity of even this starting point for discussions within this opening covering note.

The specific intention of this first Special Issue is three-fold:

1. To give voice to the role and nature of African agency within Africa-China relations, including from African scholars. Articles by Africans, especially those living and working in Africa, were encouraged, but non-Africans perspectives are very much included;

Africa" discussion: *China-Africa* being connections between; *China in Africa* as an interventionary presence; and *China and Africa* as a partnership; with *Africa-China*, *Africa in China* and *Africa and China* being a deliberate effort to 'signify and advance a substantiative re-orientation of scholarship'.³

2. To showcase the work of and collaborations between an inter-generational range of scholars (in line with the Journal of Leadership and Developing Societies objective to publish academic work from scholars of all ages at all levels of career). These include world renowned senior academics, those in early and mid-career roles, and young scholars who are often excluded from peer-reviewed academic discussions, including doctoral candidates and post-graduate students; and
3. To showcase the utility of leadership theory and leadership frameworks of analysis in improving understanding of relations between and within Africa-China dynamics.

The Special Issue on 'Leadership and Agency within Africa-China Relations' was born from discussions held in September 2019 at the African Leadership Centre, King's College London, to form the 'Africa on China Working Group', to centralise African perspectives and Africa-led research within the wider academic narratives and policy prescriptions on Africa-China relations. The Working Group was established under Research Cluster 6 of the ALCs ongoing research agenda on Peace, Society, and the State in Africa, which focuses on the interface between international political-economy contexts and the notions and realities of African statehood across times. It was also formed as part of the Universities Network on Global Leadership, Peace and Development, a research and education collaboration between ALC-King's, Peking University, and eight African partner universities.⁴

Discussions from that group included proposing a series of questions, which this Special Issue is seen as a starting contribution to:

³ Alden, Chris, and Large, Daniel (2018), *Studying Africa and China*, in Alden, Chris, and Large, Daniel (2018), eds. *New directions in Africa-China studies* (Abingdon: Routledge), p.12

⁴ This 3-year project is led by the African Leadership Centre (ALC), King's College London, as a joint collaboration between: Centre for African Studies, Peking University; Institute for Development Studies, University

of Nairobi; Department of Political Science, University of Pretoria; Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Buea; Department of History and International Studies, University of Jos; Department of International Relations, Obafemi Awolowo University; Debre Berhan University, Ethiopia; Institute of African Studies, University of Legon; and University of Port Harcourt.

- Why is it worth examining African perspectives on China? Do we have well studied African perspectives on Europe, the US and other actors, and so why is this focus on China necessary?
- How will these African perspectives go beyond the existing limited work in this area? What value will it add at the present time in the current global and African context? What African perspectives would the study focus on?
- What do the people, communities and other African actors who interact with or are affected by China think of China's engagement? Where and how are they impacted and what questions and issues are therein? How do these perspectives differ across the board?
- How are relationships impacted within Africa? Is there one aspect of China's engagement and impact that is most evident and has the greatest reach (such as technology? or trade?) and what are their implications for Africa's engagement with China and other global actors?
- What should Africa do to shape the relationship to their own benefit? How would China want this relationship to change if it understood wider African perspectives?

The Special Issue sought to take an Africa-centric analysis of leadership dynamics and agency occurring within Africa-China relations, broadly defined. We sought scholarship that recognises, unpacks, and interrogates assertions of influence that African states and African citizens have within these relations. The special issue is underlined by the assumption that African states exist in a global context where the policies, actions or inactions, and practices of major political-economy actors have historically shaped the identities, character, functions and ideological orientations of statehood; but that African actors, be they at the local, national, regional or global level, have shaped and are shaping the nature of contemporary relations with China to an extent underrepresented in much academic analysis.

This is not the only Special Issue of its kind, or the only collaboration effort that has identified and noted some of these issues. The emergence of various efforts to showcase and centralise the African perspective and African agency within contemporary global power dynamics (of which China is certainly central) is refreshing and much needed. Other groups and

initiatives include the [SSRC China-Africa Knowledge Project](#) with the [CA-AC network](#); the [Wits China and Africa Reporting Project](#); the [Centre for Chinese Studies at Stellenbosch University](#); the [Association of Asian Studies in Africa](#); and the [African Research Universities Alliance](#), which we welcome collaboration with and conversations between. There are undoubtedly more not listed here and others that will emerge. Other invaluable Special Issue contributions also include from: [The Africa Review - Volume 47 \(2020\): From Sino-Africa to Afro-China Engagements in the 21st Century: Emerging Interdisciplinary Issues and Research Gaps](#); and the [African Studies Quarterly - Issue 3-4 \(2016\): China-Africa Relations: Political And Economic Engagement And Media Strategies](#)

As noted, the conceptualisation of China being the named, dominant, focus-worthy actor within Africa-China relations is widespread and much engrained; and a plethora of initiatives and efforts will be needed to shift the academic and policy debate towards a more sophisticated, useful, accurate understanding of the ever-changing, unfurling dynamics between the African continent and Chinese “civilisation state”.

Within this Special Issue, therefore, Chris Alden – a world renowned Africa-China scholar – working with Nathaniel Ocuaye – an MSc International Relations Alumni (LSE) and Project Support Assistant from Ghana – co-author “Relocating African Agency: Assessing the Role of ‘Local Patrons’ and Chinese Enterprises in the Construction Sector in Ghana”, that argues ‘local patrons’ in Africa are actually the most powerful determinants of the success of Chinese enterprises in Africa. The local patrons ‘informal connections’ to local state authorities are essential to Chinese firms gaining entry to local markets in Ghana. These crucial African actors form a bonded relationship that facilitates integration of Chinese enterprises into the African political economy, and the work thus challenges conventional notions that non-state African actors are marginal to the success or failure of Chinese incursions into the continent.

Kiale Nyiayaana, at the University of Port Harcourt, and Jackson Jack, at Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State, both in Nigeria, are scholars co-authoring “Chinese Investments in Nigeria and the Political Economy of Trade, 1999 - 2019: A Leadership Perspective”. The article demonstrates how the contrasting character of the internal leadership processes throws up inclusivity, accountability, productivity and development in China, and exclusion, opportunistic behaviour, and underdevelopment in Nigeria. They argue this also affected trade imbalances between the two countries, as

although Nigeria does benefit from Chinese trade, loans and investments in terms job opportunities and infrastructural developments, such benefits further deepen Nigeria's underdevelopment and dependence on China because of the extractive behaviour of Nigeria's political leaders.

Abiodun Alao's – a senior academic and another leading Africa-China scholar from Nigeria – work, "China, Other BRIC Nations, and Africa's Natural Resources: Continuation in the Politics of Allies as Rivals", investigates how some of the intense rivalries between Brazil, Russia, India and China, manifest in Africa. It focuses on how Africa's natural resources have been at the centre of hidden and open controversies between them. It argues that individual national interests of specific BRIC nations, rather than the prestige of the superficial membership of an informal group, plays a very major factor in determining the relationship between China and other BRIC countries as they relate to Africa's natural resource politics. The article also argues that, in the long run, China runs the risk of losing out in the rivalry with other BRIC countries in Africa, especially against the background of increasing anti-Chinese sentiments on the continent. It warns and predicts that the animosity of local Africans against these international actors generally and China in particular, is increasing in intensity and will prove detrimental to long term relations if the grievances felt around the continued extraction of national assets are not better heeded.

Barney Walsh – a mid-career Senior Lecturer at King's College London – discusses Uganda's President Museveni within "Leadership-as-Process and International Relations: Re-examining Agency within China-Africa Relations", arguing for a re-examination of China's engagement with Africa from a leadership perspective. The paper asks how leadership processes affect African agency within China-Africa relations, and demonstrates how Museveni is able to assert influence over domestic constituencies, global powers and regional actors, thus appearing as an outstanding example of African agency; albeit one that has failed to enact meaningful, transformative change. The paper concludes that China would benefit from a more sophisticated

understanding of African leadership, in order to better engage the (problematic) social contracts between citizen and state in Africa and remain a valued foreign partner of first choice.

In the shorter pieces, two post-graduate students, Wokedje Homawoo (Togolese and French) and Sterling Conyers (USA), author the commentary "African Agency within Confucius Institutes? Challenges to equal cultural exchange between CIs and African host countries." Here they interrogate whether CI's have delivered on their stated purpose to create equitable cultural exchanges with African host countries, querying that lack of oversight, limited input from host institution faculty members, and a strategy of valuing breadth over depth, mean they have thus far struggled to do so. They argue, however, that African students and teachers are exercising the necessary agency to advance their immediate goals through the opportunities that CIs can offer them. And Awino Okech – a Reader at the University of SOAS and gender activist from Kenya – in her Leadership in Practice piece titled "Chinese Funded Projects and Open Governance in Kenya", discussed examples from Kenya of 'leadership from below' whereby local Africans challenge the impacts and influences of China. She outlines how strategic litigation and direct action coupled with legislative interventions are two avenues in which local citizens are helping transform conversations about Chinese investments in Africa so that they focus on government accountability to citizens rather than on China as an external actor.

Combined, the papers in this first of several volumes on "Africa-China" relations broadens understanding of African perspectives on China with several layers of observations. First, it demonstrates the diversity of ways in which African agency is expressed in relation to China's engagement in Africa. Second and related, beyond the state, it draws attention to the multiplicity of ways in which individual African actors demonstrate agency in this relationship. And lastly, it illustrates how powerful state actors use both position and reference power to leverage China's engagement to secure state advantage as well as personal prestige in regional affairs.