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**Three Perspectives on Africa-China Relations:
Sino-Optimism, Sino-Pragmatism and Sino-Pessimism**

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I. Introduction

Does discourse reflect reality or does it construct it? The answer we give to this deceptively simple question defines our epistemological position. This essay is based on the premise that discourse not merely represents 'reality' but also it produces meaning, with empirical 'evidence' used as much for obscuring some aspects of the 'reality' as for highlighting others. From an African(-ist) perspective the issue surrounding the discourse about Afro-Chinese relations boils down to whether China's stepped-up activities in Africa are a boon for the continent. In this universe of discourse are, on the one hand, *Sino-pessimists* who see China as exploitative which is not only already sucking Africa's resources in order to fuel its own rapid industrialization but also is bound to destroy Africa's development potential in the process. On the other hand, there are *Sino-optimists* who perceive China as the ultimate savior, capable of or willing to "develop" Africa. Between the two divergent views are those sitting on the fence for the time being, the *Sino-pragmatists*, who, although less sanguine about the potential outcome of Afro-Chinese relations, are willing to reserve judgment until the dust settles.

The emergence of these perspectives can be explained first in terms of the contradictions in Chinese activities in Africa in recent years, the dualism of China's diplomacy in Africa. One of which is manifested in China's tendency to invest both in resource-rich countries (such as, Angola, Sudan, Congo Rep., Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria) and in countries not yet known for producing or having resources critically important to China (for instance, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Central African Republic (CAR), Mozambique, Tanzania, Liberia and Madagascar).

Another manifestation is the multiplicity of actors on the part of China ranging from the state, semi-private enterprises, and private companies to private individuals. Then there is China's emphasis on both bilateralism and multilateralism. China today has diplomatic relations with forty-four countries in Africa. In addition to one-on-one relations with African governments on bilateral basis, China also has shown inclinations for diplomatic engagement about African issues with inter-governmental and regional organizations. Presently, China already has representatives not only at the African Union (AU) and New Economic Partnership for African development (NEPAD) but also in the Common Market for Eastern and Southern

Africa (COMESA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).¹

The fourth expression of this diplomatic duality relates to China's contributions to peace and conflict in Africa. In recent years Chinese personnel contribution to PKO activities in Africa has increased substantially. However, China's arms have also contributed directly or indirectly to the perpetuation or, in some cases, escalation of violent conflicts in places ranging from the Congo and the Sudan to the Horn of Africa.²

Fifthly, there is the issue of China's collaboration with and defiance of the West both at the same time. China has on some occasions acted *in tandem* with, for instance, the IMF, the World Bank, United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and other multilateral institutions on issues relevant to Africa. On other occasions China has ignored the principles of some of these very institutions.

The duality of China's diplomacy in Africa is also partly a function of the heterogeneity of African actors with all their contradictions. The continent is home to countries which are diverse in their resource-endowment, level of political stability and nature of governance. But the ambiguity of China's behavior is rooted in issues which are far wider than what goes on in Africa itself. China's international behaviors elsewhere, too, are often contradictory for a variety of reasons. Analysts still wonder, for instance, whether China is/would be a "radical revisionist" or a "moderate reformist" internationally, and there are signs which point to both predispositions in China's international behaviors. In spite of the fact that there is not yet a clear pattern of China's diplomacy in Africa, or because of this fact, divergent perspectives now dominate the discourse.

The perspectives about Africa-China relations are divergent also because of inherent nature of perspectives. Any given perspective by definition not only highlights a certain part of reality to some extent, it also simultaneously makes the other part invisible. Social facts acquire meaning through interpretation and judgment, and the latter are relative to where we stand in the society. Optimists, pragmatists and pessimists about the impact of Sino-African relations can all thus point to aspects of the dualistic Afro-Chinese relations which support their respective position.

But there are other pieces too, which we can assemble for a fuller understanding of how these perspectives emerged and why they co-exist. One of these relates to the fact that China is a relative new-comer to Africa as an aspiring major power. This means that Sino-African relationship has not yet fully crystallized and that it is too early to assess the wider impacts. It is thus the interplay between the fluidity of the current state of Afro-Chinese relations and the underlying wishes, hopes and fears about the future direction and impact of this relationship which gave rise to the divergent perspectives. It is fair to say therefore that these perspectives reflect variable recognition of the underlying possibilities of the outcome of Afro-Chinese relations which are contingent upon factors internal to China, Africa and the global political economy in general.

II. Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism and Sino-pessimism

We have identified above three perspectives as informing the current discourse about China-Africa relations: Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism and Sino-pessimism. These perspectives roughly parallel, but are broader than, what Chris Alden called the three strands of thought about Afro-Chinese relations, namely: China as development partner; China as economic competitor, and China as colonizer.³ Ian Taylor has also addressed the same notion, however less explicitly.⁴

For Sino-optimists, China's re-entry into Africa is to be celebrated. Africa stands to gain much from closer ties with China. The tone of Sino-optimistic literature on Afro-Chinese relations is laudatory. The former president of Botswana, Festus Mogae, asserted recently: "...had China not come into existence as a partner for us we would have needed to create her."⁵ Another Sino-optimist declared: "China is the only global power laying the tracks for an Africa-wide economic renaissance."⁶

Optimists remind us about the greater attention China has paid to Africa in recent years. They also point to the overall positive performance of and encouraging trends in African economies in the first decade of this century, a decade which coincided with China's increased activities in Africa.⁷ Additionally, Sino-optimists point to the scores of projects ranging from roads, dams and bridges to the Chinese-sponsored special industrial zones which are under

construction in some African countries. These projects, Sino-optimists say, testify China's commitment to Africa's industrialization.

For Sino-pragmatists, on the other hand, China's greater involvement in Africa could be neo-colonial in its consequence, if not in its intent, since the logic of capital is the same whether those in the driving seat are Europeans, Americans or Chinese. Sino-pragmatists point to the generally unchanged terms and structures of Africa's economic interactions with China vis-a-vis those with the West. While China's exports to Africa are processed and manufactured goods, the overwhelming proportion of China's imports from Africa are primary products. But, even so, the pragmatists add, China could have a more lasting and positive impact in some countries and not in others; in some sectors and not in others. Which scenario is fulfilled and where in turn largely depends not only on what China does but also on the type of policy environment African governments create. But pragmatists also hasten to add that it is nevertheless too early to make a sweeping judgment whether the disadvantages of a deeper Afro-Chinese economic engagement would outweigh the advantages for Africa.

A variant of Sino-pragmatism also maintains that the possibility of African renaissance hinges not merely on transforming the old order but also on building a new one. As Sarah Raine put it, "...handled properly, China's interests in Africa present an opportunity for African development..."⁸ And yet, Sino-pragmatists are generally more accommodative of China in Africa not only because Africa's experience with the West had not benefitted the continent but also because China was coming to Africa without the baggage of slavery and colonialism.⁹ Sino-pragmatists hope that something good would come out of Africa's closer economic interactions with China and therefore it is at least premature to dismiss the potentialities. In this tone, one Sino-pragmatist has said recently: "Let us give the Chinese a chance in Africa...then put their feet to the fire if and when they do not do right by Africa...but before then, I am unwilling and quite splendidly disinterested in joining the bandwagon of hostilities directed at China..."¹⁰

For Sino-pessimists, China's behaviors in Africa are reminiscent of the behaviors of European powers in the 19th century when the industrial revolution motivated them to "go out" in search of raw materials and markets. Sino-pessimists warn that the major impetus behind China's "go out" policy too, is the same: the need for resources and markets. The major

difference, according to Sino-pessimists, is that China has re-calibrated its approach and its rhetoric to the requirements of the 21st century, with the slogan of “developing mission,” taking the place of “civilizing mission.” In this vein, Sino-pessimists point to the similarities between the Chinese and Western aid to Africa such as its tied nature, its minimal contribution to capacity building, its singular focus on resource and future commercial opportunities, and insist that both are instruments for achieving certain strategic and diplomatic objectives; that both are instruments for gaining access to resources; and that both seek to benefit employment at home and are tied to the purchase of goods from home countries.

In analysing contemporary Africa-China relations, some Sino-pessimists go even further calling into question the benefits of the so-called the “Beijing consensus”, for them it is essentially not different from the “Washington consensus.” They reason out that Africa’s terms of trade with China are not any better than Africa’s terms of trade with the West. In fact, Africa has continuously run deficit in its trade with China in recent years whereas the continent has consistently registered surplus in its trade with the traditional trading partners in the West. The same critics of the so-called the lopsided China-Africa relations recognize China’s renewed interest in Africa and its increased investment in the continent. They are also quick to add however that China’s investment in Africa is generally more resource-seeking than efficiency-seeking, and in the long term, the former will only have the consequence of deepening and reinforcing the structural distortions of African economies by further biasing them towards primary exports.

Sino-pessimists thus argue that Africa’s engagement with China would perpetuate the structure of dependency and underdevelopment which is already in place and, moreover, inhibit or block Africa’s efforts to overcome them, hindering industrialization and reinforcing the old imperial division of labor in which Africa provided raw materials to Europe and bought consumer and industrial goods in return. It must be mentioned that Sino-optimists also do not deny the fact that China’s investment in Africa favors primary products or natural resource development. But they also point out that compared to Africa’s traditional development partners, China has committed proportionally more capital for the infrastructure sector in Africa, and that would positively affect the efficiency of African economies in the long-term.

What is more, Sino-optimists remind us that the steady increase in China's investment in the continent in itself is a cause for celebration for a continent that is not known for attracting foreign direct investment.

Although Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism and Sino-pessimism can be separated for analytical purposes, as we have tried to do above, it is often hard to do so in practice. Even in studies that clearly acknowledge the existence of divergent perspectives, a clear answer as to which one is more sensible is hard to come-by.¹¹ Only rarely do analysts spell out explicitly the singular perspective which informs their analysis. And that is precisely why we need a set of strategies for teasing out the underlying perspective from the seemingly disinterested historical and descriptive analyses about Afro-Chinese relations. What are these strategies?

We can start by looking at the ontological commitment of the writer which is often reflected in the theme or subject-matter of the analysis. In other words, we ask, what is the *problematique* of the discourse about China-Africa relations? "When we research or teach," wrote IR scholar Steve Smith, "we either explicitly or implicitly give that topic a status and we also locate it within a view of the world that reflects our cultural/social/economic and political location."¹² One would not, for instance, expect an optimistic reading of Afro-Chinese relations from works on how "China's loots Africa" or "China's expansion in Africa" or "China's invasion of Africa" as principal themes of investigation.¹³ It would not also be illogical to expect a sympathetic reading of China in Africa from works which purportedly seek to show how China is "challenging Western hegemony in Africa," or how China is an "all-weather friend."¹⁴

It must be pointed out here that two analysts could see China in Africa as a challenger to the West but, for ideological reasons, subscribe to different perspectives, one embracing Sino-optimism if s/he approves of the challenges, and the other identifying with Sino-pessimism if s/he does not. Also, would a greater emphasis on Chinese interest in Africa's extractive sectors to the exclusion of other aspects of the relationship imply a Sino-pragmatist or Sino-pessimist perspective? This is a defensible proposition. By the same token, an analysis which exclusively deals with China's investment in the infrastructure sector in Africa is likely to lead to a more optimistic conclusion about the impact of China in Africa than one whose subject matter is China's oil diplomacy in Africa.¹⁵ The perspectives of many writers on the subject nevertheless

betray greater subtlety and require digging deeper into the text in order to grasp the underlying perspective. Normative commitments are most potent in analysis especially when they are least explicit.

As a supplementary strategy, concepts which are deployed in an analysis can be considered. As IR scholars J Friedrichs and F Kratochwil have argued in a different context, “our choice of observation to be made and concepts to be applied will be driven by our research interest. Do we want to control complexity? Do we want to solve a social problem? Do we seek understanding?”¹⁶ If the key concepts of the discourse about Afro-Chinese relations are, for instance, “China’s scramble for Africa,” “China’s re-colonization of Africa,” “China’s new colonialism” the analyst is most probably approaching the relationship from a Sino-pragmatic or a Sino-pessimistic perspective.¹⁷ On the other hand, if the key concept is “strategic partnership” between Africa and China, the writer is most likely to be a Sino-optimist. Could we get clues also from the national identity or geographical origin of the analyst? The answer is yes to some extent, but only if used with care. Not surprisingly, most Chinese analysts seem optimistic about the outcome of Sino-African relations for both sides as are many Africans. But, needless to say, not all Westerners are Sino-pragmatists or Sino-pessimists just like not all Africans are Sino-optimists.

The discourse about Africa-China relations can also be classified, following a Coxian methodology, into one of problem-solving and critical variety, with the former focusing on order and stability in the international system whereas the latter engaging issues of legitimacy and justice. Is there a relationship between ideological predisposition of an analyst and his/her perspective with regard to the discourse about Afro-Chinese relations? When we look back at the recent history of the discourse about development, we find that two views have dominated the development debate in the past half a century. On the one hand, there was the view held by Marxist and neo-Marxist intellectuals that global capitalism has the propensity to under-develop Africa and that the solution was for Africa to disengage itself from world capitalist system. On the other hand, right-leaning intellectuals saw the process of economic exchange between Africa and the West as a positive-sum game, beneficial to both sides, even if the benefit was never equal. A variant—or distant relative-- of this paradigm maintained it was just too late to

disengage from global capitalism, even if it was desirable to do so.¹⁸

Those with strong ideological persuasion seemingly tend to be clearer in their perspectives, whether they are Sino-optimists or Sino-pessimists, than those who are less “ideologically-bound”. Partly for this reason the latter group tends to draw conclusions about Afro-Chinese relations which are both safe and balanced but also sometimes intellectually useless.

Subsequent to China’s latest arrival in Africa, however, left-leaning intellectuals seem to be reversing their position by advocating Africa’s deeper engagement with China and by suggesting that this could accelerate Africa’s own development. At least at the moment there seems to be a correlation between ideology and discourse about Africa-China relations. If one is leftist, one is also likely to be Sino-optimist.

I. On the predominance of Sino-optimism

If the three perspectives are all articulated in contemporary discourse, it is undoubtedly Sino-optimism which captures the prevailing public and intellectual mood in Africa. This is in sharp contrast to what is increasingly the case in Europe and in the United States.¹⁹ One senior African diplomat has recently argued:

... the relationship between China and Africa is coming under close scrutiny, but mostly, not in an objective manner, rather in a manifestly biased way which totally excludes the *African perspective*...[T]he *colonial perspective*, the condescending attitude towards Africa, is still vibrant.²⁰ (Emphasis added)

The African perspective the diplomat was referring to is, of course, Sino-optimism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Sino-optimism has been embraced almost uniformly by Africa’s ruling elites in all corners of the continent.²¹ It is also true that China’s activities in Africa have wider support among ordinary Africans. One logical question we can ask, therefore, is this: why is Sino-optimism so predominant in Africa today? What are the elements of China’s soft power in the continent?

Sino-optimism can be slightly re-defined here as the attraction China enjoys in Africa. But a distinction has also to be made between the attractiveness of China to Africa's elites and the attraction it commands among ordinary Africans. Africa's rulers see China as genuine partner in their effort to overcome the challenges of modernization. Because China has also repeatedly expressed solidarity with African countries,²² economic and political elite in Africa are almost certain that China could, and even would, ignite Africa's economic modernization. On the question of whether China could indeed become a partner of Africa, there are those who, using a looser definition of partnership, say that it already is. China is after all buying more from Africa, it is selling more to Africa, it is investing more in Africa, and it is lending more to Africa. On the other hand, there are those who point out that China benefits more than Africa from all of these transactions by virtue of its being the stronger party and, therefore, China is not a partner of Africa any more than other major countries in Europe or North America are. In fact, the "traditional partners" of Africa seem more critical in terms of the level of assistance Africa receives.²³

Africa's elites also view China as a model. The reasoning involved here is, first, that the socio-economic condition in China is broadly similar to those in Africa. In this vein, Africa's leaders have echoed what Ai Ping has asserted: "...China and Africa share similar national conditions and are both faced with the same historical task of vigorously developing their economies".²⁴

The second, and related, reason why China is regarded as a model has more to do with China's continued success in modernizing its economy in a short period of time. In 2005 China ranked 119th, far behind Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa in GNI per capita in US dollars.²⁵ In 2008 China's GNI per capita ranked 100th, still below countries like Angola, Namibia and South Africa.²⁶ China became top exporter in 2009 of goods and services in the world, with 9.6% share, surpassing the United States and Japan. China was 17th in the share of global export as recently as in 1985.²⁷ In August 2010 China became the second largest economy replacing Japan which had held that position for many decades. China's success is indeed spectacular.

Thirdly, China is viewed as a model because the developmental path chosen by a number of African governments is believed to be consistent with China's. China does not

therefore try to influence the policies of these governments through its loans, investment and aid.

The view that China could serve as a model for Africa is not also without its detractors. Notwithstanding the rhetoric about the commonality, and even similarity, of the challenges to Chinese and African development, the African condition could not be more different. Needless to say, China's rapid economic growth in recent years was possible because of domestic and external factors. The domestic factors included, first and foremost, the 1979 reform which opened up the economy for business, China's potentially huge domestic market, its large pool of low cost and highly disciplined workforce and the strong sense of national purpose which pervades the society. One could also add the positive role played by the Chinese Diaspora including those in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Another relevant factor was the existence of an open trading order internationally. The confluence of the two sets of factors triggered a fast-paced economic growth in China that is based on heavy inflow of foreign direct investment and massive export of manufactured goods.

For the critics of Sino-optimism in Africa, China is therefore growing because of its internal potentialities and favorable international condition, and these are conditions which, unfortunately, cannot be simply replicated in Africa. Granted China and Africa share similarities in their political systems and, especially, in the role their respective governments (or ruling parties) play in the national economy. But China's economy is growing rapidly in spite of these shared elements, not because of them and, on this consideration alone, the relevance of China for Africa as an example-setter becomes extremely limited.

The notions of China as a partner and a model are, of course, not inseparable. One could admire and emulate China as a model without buying into the idea that China would (have to) be a partner, capable of and committed to igniting economic modernization in Africa. To the extent that China's interests are dynamic and expansive, which they are, it does not indeed automatically follow that the two would remain compatible indefinitely. In other words, China would continue to be a partner of Africa to the extent that it is also in China's own interest to do so,²⁸ but China could continue to stimulate Africa's effort to modernize its economy even long after China ceases to be Africa's partner.

Among ordinary Africans, at least three elements of China's diplomacy have captured their interest. The first is the emphasis in China's own diplomacy on the building of visible and symbolic projects such as dams, conference halls and roads that are designed not only to deliver services but also produce the "meaning" of solidarity. China's approach in this regard is sometimes direct and obvious. At other times it is more subtle.

Secondly, China's approach emphasizes projects which are instantaneous and tangible, projects that give ordinary people concrete power of choice. A project that is aimed at building roads and dams is more tangible to ordinary people than one whose goal is promotion of democracy and good governance. The simple observation made recently by President of China's Exim Bank elucidates this. To the critics of the Bank's policy of lending money to African regimes with poor human rights records, he said: "roads and radios are more urgent needs for Africans than human rights and freedom."²⁹

The third relevant element in China's attractiveness arises from sheer human solidarity or empathy. Chinese expatriate workers are seen often toiling in the least hospitable weather and environmental conditions in Africa. Mindful of the number of Chinese who had lost their lives in the last few years in Ethiopia's Ogaden desert and in the plains of Tekeze River, Ethiopians are, for instance, generally grateful to the Chinese for rendering their service at great personal risk to themselves. "In some Ethiopian towns and villages," observed Mary Fitzgerald recently, "it is not uncommon for foreigners to find themselves being greeted by children yelling "China, China"."³⁰

Would Sino-optimism endure in Africa in the long-haul? It depends upon the extent to which the rising expectations of Africans are met, expectation which, ironically, Sino-optimism itself has created.³¹ These expectations will be met in turn only if African governments make strides in improving the economic well-being of Africans. One measure of whether Africa is on the right track in this respect is to look at the changes taking place in the economy. Although further studies are necessary, to assess more fully the extent and forms of the impact of China in Africa, it is fair to say that the record so far is mixed at best.

III. Conclusion

The generous attention which Africa-China relations received in recent years is not without its perplexities in some ways.³² Let us first consider China's relative standing in Africa in terms of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Even after allowing for the mystery and complexity which has generally shrouded China's official statistics, the level of investment of other Asian countries in Africa is more substantial than China's. China ranked only fourth, after Malaysia, India and Singapore, in terms of investment in Africa in 2004.³³ In 2008 the level of Singapore's investment in Africa was larger than that of China.³⁴ Why, then, did China get attention that by far exceeded the attention given to other Asian countries in this context? In response to this question, some would say, China is a would-be hegemon unlike the other three. This is perhaps the right answer but only in part as there should be more to the issue than that.

The second aspect of the perplexity of the discourse about China in Africa is highlighted by the regional distribution of China's FDI. From China's total overseas FDI in 2006, the share of Africa was relatively small, 4 percent, compared to Latin America's 26 percent and Asia's 64 percent.³⁵ China's trade and official development assistance also shows a generally similar pattern.³⁶ Why, then, did Afro-Chinese relations attract and get more attention than, say, Sino-Latin American relations? Would it be, as some have claimed, that it was the huge "infrastructure deficit" in Africa which greatly magnifies China's investment by leaving a major footprint? This theory also does not fly because China's investment in Africa was too modest compared to other major powers to leave in its wake a major footprint. China's FDI in Africa is only a fraction of that of UK, US, and France.³⁷

If empirical evidence thus shows that Sino-African relations was not yet a most important relations both for Africa and for China, what, then, was the driving force behind so much interest in Afro-Chinese relations? A tentative answer would be that the deep interest was partly a reflection of the inevitable reaction to China's accelerated activities around the globe. But it was the pace rather than the scale of China's activities in Africa which stimulated the imagination of many.

China was perceived to be posing a danger in Africa not just to Africa but also to the West. The clarion call was thus sounded. The ominous message was perhaps best

encapsulated in the headline of a British newspaper: "How China is Taking Over Africa...and Why We in the West Should be Very Worried."³⁸ One should be forgiven if such a headline reminisces him/her of the fear of the "Yellow Peril" which was once common in the West. The result of this form of narrative was in any case the emergence of a sustained discourse about the "China threat" in Africa, a special type of Sino-pessimism whose frame of reference was not whether China was a force for good in Africa or not. Instead the frame of reference was whether or not China in Africa was a bad thing for the West.

These Sino-pessimists were convinced that China would be posing a threat in Africa to longstanding Western interests at least in two ways. On the one hand, there was the growing popularity of the Chinese model of development among some of Africa's ruling elites as a realistic alternative to the Western approach. Increasingly the promise of this model in Africa was beginning to be contrasted with what was regarded as the failed model of neoliberal capitalism. Congressman Chris Smith, former chair of the sub-committee on Africa in the US House of Representatives recently articulated the "China threat" in this way: "People like Bashir [of Sudan], Mugabe [of Zimbabwe] and so many others love the Chinese model of control and secret police...I am very worried about the influence of their bad human rights and bad governance model is having..."³⁹ At a higher level of abstraction, British scholar Ian Taylor was also referring to the same when he pointed to the accusation leveled at China in Africa for "reifying the neo-patrimonial regimes."⁴⁰

The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's target, too, was clear when she remarked in Lusaka, Zambia in June 2011: "We saw that during colonial times, it is easy to come in, take out natural resources, pay off leaders and leave. And when you leave, you don't leave much behind for the people who are there. We don't want to see a new colonialism."⁴¹ It was out of these considerations that the discourse of the "China threat" was born in the West. The heated discourse inevitably excited the interest and captured the attention of many Africans and Africanists, too. It is not far from the truth, therefore, to say that Sino-optimism and Sino-pragmatism were also reactions to the discourse about the so-called the "China threat."

Let us pause for a moment and ask: does China really pose a threat to the West in Africa? The answer to this question depends on one's perspective. If we assume Afro-Chinese

relations would continue to grow and expand, China would increasingly become a competitor to the West for some of the strategic raw materials in Africa. Even so, however, the West, China and Africa would all benefit from a positive improvement in the African condition. From the perspective of the liberal theory of international relations, therefore, all sides would be better off and all would gain in absolute terms under this scenario. An Africa with a thriving economy is also a significant market for goods produced both in the West and in China. But if political realism informs our observation and analysis, the West would be the ultimate loser as the issue becomes relative gain—who will get how much more compared to the other side?

In 2009 American scholar Deborah Brautigam published *The Dragon's Gift*.⁴² Written from a Sino-optimistic perspective, the book was significant because the author is credible in what she says due to her intimate knowledge of China and Africa. The subtitle of the book, *The Real Story of China in Africa*, also suggests it was perhaps designed as a corrective and balanced alternative to the dominant Sino-pessimistic discourse so common in the West.

We have highlighted above the parallel course which is traversed by Sino-pessimism in the public and intellectual arena. But such parallelism is not limited to Sino-pessimism. Sino-optimism, too, shows similar inclination. In November 2004 a high-level Ethiopian delegation visited China. The visit took the Ethiopian delegation to Shanxi province, an exemplary province in economic growth, especially in irrigation development activities, and instrumental in China's rapid agricultural development. The delegation also visited a "model" city, one that reportedly managed to extricate itself from poverty in a short period of time.⁴³ As head of the delegation, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi would later remark: "Chinese transformation disproved the pessimistic attitude that "if you are poor once, you are likely to be poor forever."⁴⁴ At about the same time American political scientist Horace Campbell, too, was arguing: "The rapid rise of China is testament that poor societies can rise beyond colonial exploitation and the mangled priorities of societies which ensure that colonial societies remain a producer of raw materials."⁴⁵ This is not to link political scientist Campbell in any way to Ethiopia's leader; but the similarity in their language is still remarkable.

Is Sino-philial, the growing public and intellectual interest in Afro-Chinese relations, a good thing for Africa? A Sino-pessimist, a Sino-optimist and a Sino-pragmatist could all be

considered Sino-philes to the extent that they devote extensive attention to the nature and impact of Afro-Chinese relations. A Sino-phile is, however, not necessarily Sino-fanatic or Sino-apologist; but a Sino-optimist can be at the same time Sino-fanatic. Similarly, a Sino-optimist can concurrently be a Sino-phobe to the extent, for instance, that that individual was convinced Afro-Chinese relations would benefit Africa in the long-term but loathes China for its role in propping up “neo-patrimonial regimes” in the continent.

In general the proliferation of the discourse about Africa-China relations is a good thing for Africa. However, a discourse about this discourse is also badly needed from time to time, a discourse which is designed to induce China’s greater involvement and more positive impact in Africa. Our goals as scholars should also include challenging the notion that there is the ultimate perspective, the supreme epistemology, which is unchanging and is independent of our representation. All perspectives are not equal for sure, but that should not prevent us from questioning and challenging each, after all every perspective is relative, contingent and partial. Given the role narrative plays in the construction of reality, it is also a good thing that Sino-optimism now prevails in Africa. Social reality is born out of concerted action around a belief which a discourse enables, even if that belief is sometimes far removed from reality. Social reality is not independent of the language which is used to describe it.

Endnotes

- ¹ For useful insights about the emerging relationship between China and the African Union see Ali (2009: 32-34).
- ² This paradox is illustrated in Taylor (2009), esp. Chapters 5 & 6. For a deep analysis of China's military relations with Africa see Shinn (2008: 155-196).
- ³ Alden (2007: 5-6).
- ⁴ Taylor (2009: 3)
- ⁵ Mogae (2009: 21). Also see Shelton (2007: 232-267).
- ⁶ Dayo Olopade, "China's Long March Across Africa", August 6, 2008; <http://www.africa.com/blog/blog.chinaslongmarchacrossafrica.6.html> (Accessed 29 April 2010)
- ⁷ See C W Dugger, "Report Offers Optimistic View of Africa's Economies," *The New York Times*, June 24, 2010, p. A. 20.
- ⁸ Raine (2009: 4). Also see Cheru and Calais (2010: 221-242).
- ⁹ If anything China's historical contact with Africa was said to be peaceful. See Dreyer (2007).
- ¹⁰ Paul Adujie, "Re: China Bashing & Foreign Investments in Africa," USAafricadialogie@googlegroups.co (Accessed 26 July 2010).
- ¹¹ For instance see Alden (2007) esp. "Introduction" and "Chapter 5".
- ¹² Smith (2008: 729).
- ¹³ See for instance Chaldeans Mensah, "China's Foray into Africa: Ideational Underpinnings and Geo-economic Interests," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 4(3), 2010, 96-108. <http://www.academicjournals.org/ajpsir/pdf/pdf2010/March/Mensah.pdf> , also Michel and Beuret (2009); Andrews (2010: 1301-131).
- ¹⁴ See for example Campbell (119-137); Wenping (2007: 24-47).
- ¹⁵ Example of the former may include Foster et al.(2008) and of the latter Lee and Shalmon (2008: 109-136).
- ¹⁶ Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009: 715).
- ¹⁷ For a systematic response to many of the issues raised by Sino-optimists, see Anshan (2008: 21-49).
- ¹⁸ For a concise and systematic analysis of the history of development paradigms see Mittelman (2010): Mittelman, James H. "The Development Paradigm and Its Critics." *The International Studies Encyclopedia*. Denmark, Robert A. Blackwell Publishing, 2010. Blackwell Reference Online. 26 April 2011 <http://www.isacompendium.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781444336597_chunk_g97814443365976_ss1-9>
- ¹⁹ According to a recent survey, for instance, 53 percent of Germans, 66 percent of Italians and 70 percent of French consider China as a threat. See Casarini (2009: 178).
- ²⁰ Tekeda (2010).
- ²¹ A notable exception is Thabo Mbeki, the former president of South Africa, who reportedly said: "...China can not only just come here and dig for raw materials [but] then go away and sell us manufactured goods." Quoted in Taylor (2009: 3).
- ²² Position Paper of the People's Republic of China at the 65th Session of the UN General Assembly. <http://et.China-embassy.org/eng/zgxx/t752288.htm> (Accessed 14 October 2010).
- ²³ In 2008, Ethiopia received \$ 35 million from non-DAC countries in terms of aid and debt relief compared to \$3.3 billion from DAC countries. See *Africa Development Indicators 2010*, pp. 100-101.
- ²⁴ Ping (2005: 233).
- ²⁵ Yongpeng (2007: 275).
- ²⁶ <http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/viewthread.php?gid=2&tid=652470>, accessed 20 March 2011.
- ²⁷ *Chugoku Joho Handbook*, Tokyo: Sososha, 2010, pp. 380-381.
- ²⁸ Sautman and Hairong (2007: 94-95)
- ²⁹ Quoted in Jakobson (2009: 425).
- ³⁰ See M Fitzgerald, 'China invests in Ethiopia but at what cost?' *Irish Time* [Online] 'China invests in Ethiopia but at what cost?' (Accessed 27 January 2011). <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2010/0127/1224263206337.html>, accessed 29 January 2011.
- ³¹ For useful discussion about the circumstances under which China's attraction may be eroded see Kurlantzick (2007: 226-235); for one perspective on China's soft power in Africa in general see Kurlantzick (2009: 165-183).
- ³² That Africa in China is a hot topic which is also in the public interest in the West is betrayed by the fact that we have seen arguably the first novel on the subject in the English language, Larry Andrews' (2010) *The China-Africa*

Parallax. Furthermore, some of the depiction of China in this novel reads as though it was taken from such overtly Sino-pessimistic books as Michel and Beuret's *China Safari* (2010).

³³ Guerero and Manji (2008: 1-2).

³⁴ UNCTAD. *Economic Development in Africa. Report 2010 South-South Cooperation: Africa and the New Forms of Development Partnership*. New York and Geneva: UN, 2010, p. 86.

³⁵ Ibid; also see C Alden, D Large and R S de Oliveira "China Returns to Africa: Anatomy of an Expansive Engagement", Documento de Trabajo. Real Instituto Elcano Working Paper 51/2008. <http://www.realinstitutoalcano.com> (Accessed 12 June 2009).

³⁶ We should note, however, that China did become Africa's top trading partner for the first time in 2009, and, in aggregate china's FDI in Africa did grow to \$ 9.3 3 billion also in 2009. According Chinese diplomatic source China's FDI in Africa in 2009 was about \$US 8 billion. Ambassador Liu Gujin, Special representative for African Affairs at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China to Ethiopia, speech delivered at China-Ethiopia and China-Africa relations. Available at <http://et.china-embassy.org/eng/zagx/t772346.htm> (Accessed 18 January 2011). Between 2000 and 2010 trade between China and Latin Ammerica grew faster than China's trade with Africa. See Mauricio Cardenas, "China's Influence in Latin America," Brookings Institution and the Council of the Americas, 17 August 2011. Broadcast live on C-Span 3. Also see UNCTAD. *Economic Development in Africa. Report 2010 South-South Cooperation: Africa and the New Forms of Development Partnership*. New York and Geneva: UN, 2010, p. 30.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Andrew Malone, "How China's Taking Over Africa," *Daily Mail*, July 18, 2008.

³⁹ US House Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee Hearing on China, January 19, 2011. (Carried on C-Span, 20 January 2011).

⁴⁰ Taylor (2009: 11).

⁴¹ Speech available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/06/166028.htm> (Accessed 07/14/11). It should be pointed out that former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, too, did say the same thing a few years earlier. See footnote # 22 above.

⁴² Brautigam (2009).

⁴³ *The Ethiopian Herald*, 2 November 2004.

⁴⁴ *The Ethiopian Herald*, 23 December 2008.

⁴⁵ Campbell (2008: 100).