

In search of gravity's rainbow

Theoretical approaches and China-Africa scholarship

China-Africa scholarship to date is drawn principally from these fields: sociology, area studies (Africa and China, respectively), development studies, history, and international relations. It is naturally informed by the ontologies and epistemological concerns that are an integral part of each of these approaches. For instance, the context of the opening of a Chinese-owned factory in a peri-urban zone in greater Johannesburg is alternatively seen through the lenses of these fields as (1) an example of the expansion of sojourner communities into new sectors of economic activity; (2) a localized reminder of the diversity of Chinese actors engaged in Africa; (3) a retelling of the “trickster” fables, this time with Chinese business’ being snared by African agency; (4) the relocation of Chinese industry, in keeping with “flying geese” theory, in the service of African development; (5) a reassertion of the global patterns of the past, when the hub was to be found in Asian economies; and (6) a metaphor for the asymmetrical power relations between China and the African continent. Even these various snapshots don’t do justice to the obvious diversity within the fields and consequential contrary rendering of these topics. Moreover, there

are significant gaps in stories we have yet to tell: Where, for instance, is the work on gender relations? Have we done enough to understand the Chinese domestic environment and its impact on shaping Chinese engagement at all levels on the continent? Isn’t there more scope for comparative analysis of China-Africa interaction between different regions of China and the continent? This would begin to respond to the now conventional criticisms heard at so many conferences that “there is no such thing as ‘China’” or “there are so many ‘Africas.’”

At one level, the absence of a center of gravity for China-Africa studies underscores the domination of an “international relations-esque” approach as a starting point for the initial swath of research and publications on this topic. Studies in international relations give preference to the features of a state-led system and read intentions through the prism of various “grand theories,” leaving domestic and transnational elements as secondary or even unrecognized. Any examination of the China-Africa relationship would be better served if it were at least guided by the same strictures

that already are evident in other relationships—say, scholarship that studies France-Africa or Brazil-Africa. In this regard, the centering on the state and the continent is understood to be merely a “high politics” depiction of an ever-broadening set of stories cascading down from the state to sub-state to societal levels, transcending sovereign boundaries, and spiraling outward to expose the texture of contacts between individuals and communities.

On the wider stage, however, there does seem to be an underlying scholarly and policy-oriented discourse in all of our studies that inspires the choice of examining aspects of China-Africa, giving it meaning and shaping the general line of questions. The concern is to capture ongoing *global transformations* and their manifestations, be it through an investigation into a retail shop in rural Malawi or an analysis of a FOCAC (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) summit. In this respect, the burgeoning interest in the China-Africa relationship is precisely due to its function as the key metaphor for this transformative globalization experience in the twenty-first century, the one that has captured the imagination of the media, policymakers, and academics alike. It represents a “decentering” of global affairs and reveals—through the glass darkly, if you like—something about the world that is in the process of taking shape. Part of what this experience on what might be characterized as the periphery is telling us is a story about Africa without Europeans, and the sometimes confused response of scholarship founded in part in trying to grasp that meaning. Without colonialism’s shadow as an organizing principle for so

many of us in our work on Africa, how do we devise an understanding of the momentous and mundane events we see? We seem unable to escape our singular focus on competing discourses claiming colonial intent or benign purpose on the part of China in Africa, both easily subject to dismissive criticism.

At the same time, this inability says much about our own biases and assumptions, including the ideology of difference that causes some Western scholars in particular to exoticize this relationship, or the ideology of sameness that causes some Chinese scholars to familiarize it. The sense of “otherness” ascribed to Chinese actions in Africa or to African conduct in China that permeates Western scholarship produces research that ignores its mundane features and encourages a misperception of its unique (even “exceptional”) qualities. So, too, many Chinese academics have emphasized shared developmental and historical experiences as the dominant condition and departure point for understanding contemporary relations and issues. In both cases, it would seem, subterranean purpose skews, if not subverts, the intellectual content of the actual research being produced. Again, in the spirit of making further (and somewhat distasteful) generalizations about categories of scholarship (“Western,” etc.), beyond a few notable exceptions, the African scholarship is alternatively celebratory or alarmist in approaching the topic and rarely takes the debate much further. Furthermore, there are differences to be found in works in the subject area of China-Africa studies whose roots reside in more fundamental divergences as to the

purposes of academic work. For developing-country scholars, there is an inherent bias toward using these intellectual resources to address various problems encountered by the state or business interests. A problem-solving and policy orientation aimed at enhancing the “national development project” (however that might be conceived or articulated) permeates this work and is reflected in what, for academics working in Western institutions, is a less overtly critical approach to China-Africa topics.

Teaching China-Africa as a subject, as you might expect, in this context is extremely difficult. I supervise several PhD students working on aspects of this topic but don’t teach a course on China-Africa as such beyond providing a few lectures in courses on Africa studies and international relations. The problems this poses at the basic level include finding external examiners able to review dissertations (“Is this about China or about Africa?” is the most common reaction).

Finally, if we are in search of a grand theory through which China-Africa studies can be framed, then referring back to globalization theory, with perhaps a particular nod toward the “structuralist” approaches that permeate all of our respective disciplines, could provide an investigative backbone upon which we can develop meaningful conversations across disciplines about this phenomenon called China-Africa. But I remain suspicious of the universalizing tendencies this implies and prefer the rainbow eclecticism that characterizes studies of this topic so far.