

Establishing China-Africa linkages

Knowledge networks and research agendas

Why have scholarship and policy and public discourse on Africa and China's relationship grown so dramatically in recent years?

The shift in China-Africa relations from an aid-driven relationship to an economic-driven cooperation since the late 1990s has brought together academics, civil society, NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), and governments, both in China and Africa as well as at the global level, to analyze and study this growing relationship between China and African countries. The topics vary from politics, economics, and migration to diplomacy, sustainable development, and security, include different actors (state and non-state actors, people-to-people relations), and touch upon different areas of engagement (trade, investments, finance, and environmental sustainability, among others). The growing presence of China in Africa as well as Africa in China in trade, investments, movement of people, etc., has motivated these past decades the understanding of such a relationship.

However, in the increasing engagement between China and African countries, issues related to the political framework of the relationship, trade patterns, sustainable

investments, labor, technology and skills transfer, environmental concerns, etc., also encourage scholars, policymakers, and NGOs to develop research in those various subjects to address the existing challenges of the relationship.

At the policy level, the “go out” strategy in the late 1990s, the release of a white paper by China on its engagement in Africa in 2006, the establishment of FOCAC (the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation) in 2000, and the Chinese state's footprint in Chinese investments in Africa made by providing financial and political support are various aspects that contribute to studying China-Africa relations. The promotion by state financial institutions (e.g., Exim Bank, China Development Bank, China-Africa Development Fund) as well as political agencies (e.g., MOFCOM, SAFE, MFA) of China's overseas economic development in Africa leads to the study of different political mechanisms and frameworks developed in China in its engagement in Africa. Activities of Chinese companies (state-owned or private) in Africa, at times hand in hand with the Chinese state agenda, at other times not, drive people to assess

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the direct and indirect impacts of Chinese investments in Africa.

How do researchers located in different geographical and disciplinary locations view the evolving relationship of Chinese-African engagement?

China's engagement in Africa is more and more driven by private actors (private companies and entrepreneurs) rather than by the state. Studies have shown that there are more private enterprises involved in China's investments in Africa. While Chinese investments in resources and infrastructure development projects are the heart of China's presence in Africa, investments are slightly moving to the service (e.g., finance, ICT, tourism), agriculture, and manufacturing industries. To address issues that exist in China-Africa relations, policymakers have made it their agenda to tackle trade deficits, trade patterns, impacts of Chinese investments on labor, technology and skills transfer, migration, environmental concerns, etc. As for political relations, political leadership changes that occur every decade in China and from time to time in African countries lead to reforms that somehow determine China's political and diplomatic future with African countries and vice versa.

With more and more Chinese investments taking place in Africa, security issues sometimes related to political risks in host countries will arise. Security and risk management, therefore, have become a new area of research in China-Africa relations. The Centre for Chinese Studies (CCS), for instance, organized a conference last April on security issues that brought together Chinese and African experts on

the topic. More can be found on our website about that.

Domestic economic and political environments both in China and Africa can shape China-Africa relations. For instance, the shift from an export-driven to a consumption-driven economy in China, the social and labor reforms to improve the conditions of Chinese workers, and the lack of support for Chinese private and small and medium enterprises have all been push factors for Chinese companies to delocalize to countries that offer cheaper labor, important market size, or established manufacturing bases—hence, the competition with African industries, even though in some cases such delocalization contributes to creating joint ventures and enhancing some countries' manufacturing sectors.

What kinds of knowledge have been produced from different vantage points, for whom, and for what purpose?

Academic outputs through journal articles, conference reports, working papers, and books on China-Africa relations on a wide range of topics have been produced by scholars who work on the topic in Africa, China, or elsewhere. The research output contributes to discussions and debates around different topics with different perspectives. Policy documents are produced to serve as policy advice for decision makers. The topic is actually bringing together different academic communities: Sinology and African studies now feel the need to speak with each other, and need to involve economists, sociologists, political scientists, and others. China becomes a global topic rather than a

specialized community debate. On the African continent, one would, for instance, not find classical Sinology studies (language and culture), but rather Chinese studies from a political and economic background. The CCS in that regard remains a unique institution on the continent in combining these different disciplines under the umbrella of Chinese studies. We are the only academic center under that name (Chinese studies).

What conditions need to be put in place for African and Chinese researchers to actively participate in the international production of knowledge on this topic, as well as research collaborations, given differences in resources and capacity (e.g., access to data, publications, etc.), and the challenges of transnational collaboration?

Governments and organizations both in China and Africa should fund research that contributes to understanding China's engagement in Africa and addresses issues that exist in China-Africa relations. Partnerships with institutions and organizations that work on the topic could be beneficial for research collaborations across countries and continents for a comparative perspective—hence, joint research projects. Access to data both in China and Africa is important to illustrate research work. Data should be collected, analyzed, and exchanged among researchers. It is also interesting to compare China's engagement with that of India, Korea, Japan, or Malaysia in Africa. The Centre for Chinese Studies has a journal (*African East Asian Affairs* [AEAA]) that is established as a platform for academic exchange. Working together with

Chinese researchers is thus also important. It does, however, come with its own limitations at times and is very much dependent on personal connections.

What are the policy and advocacy implications of various research agendas?

In Africa, at the policy level, even though China-Africa relations are growing, less has been done to motivate research on China's engagement in Africa. Research in general is funded through international organizations and partnerships with foreign institutions—hence, the limited interests of policymakers in the different research agendas around China's engagement in Africa. CCS does, occasionally, receive requests for policy advice from African governments—the latest by the government of Rwanda, for instance—but, overall, funding for research is the major bottleneck in Africa. This includes relatively wealthy South Africa, where policy priorities are elsewhere than academic research. While China's presence on the continent is growing, the Centre for Chinese Studies is still the only research center in Africa entirely dedicated to work on China. Centers like CCS should be created across the continent in order to help to focus on specific regions of Africa; we are, after all, speaking of fifty-four countries when using the term “Africa.”

In China, the government has shown interest in Africa—hence, the creation of African studies centers and funding for research projects, collaborative works, conferences, and so on. Some Chinese universities have signed partnership agreements with African universities for joint work, staff exchanges, etc. African

studies has been introduced as a program in some Chinese academic institutions.

How do we create constructive institutional linkages, knowledge networks, and common research agendas?

With growing China-Africa scholarship, partnerships among institutions in China, Africa, and elsewhere that work on China-Africa relations have been established. Such partnerships can and need to be strengthened through staff exchanges (fellowships) and joint conferences. Ultimately, however, real in-depth exchanges on perspectives only happen through joint research projects, which also result in publications on topics of common interest across institutions. This type of collaboration for research has proved to be efficient, as it brings together Chinese, African, and other researchers with a comparative advantage, such as knowing the place where research is conducted, speaking a language relevant to engage with people during fieldwork, institutional linkages with policymakers, and so on. Research can be done with scholars across disciplines, as well, in order to give different perspectives on a specific research project. The dissemination of the research is also important, as it helps to get feedback and constructive criticism in order to improve a research work. Teaching in different university programs in Chinese or African studies could contribute to offering different perspectives and critical views to

students on China-Africa relations. Partnerships can be extended to policy institutions, as well as to NGOs that also work on the topic at various levels.