

From rhetorical to theoretical agendas in China-Africa studies

The study of “China-Africa Studies” is in its infancy, despite energetic and impressive growth in the past decade. Most studies to date are fact-finding explorations without much theoretical concern or ambition. Many “area studies” specialists (including China scholars and Africa scholars) see their own regions of the world as unique, culturally and historically specific phenomena. This is a deeply entrenched intellectual habit that has underlined much of conventional area studies and has segregated them from the social scientific disciplines. Now that the China-Africa literature is transcending the continental divides of area studies, it is an opportune moment to attempt a deeper transformation—making a deliberate turn to theory, one that is sensitive to comparative historical contexts.

What we have in this body of work currently are rhetorical rather than theoretical agendas. Scholarly and journalistic works (from Africa and the West generally) have often posed the rhetorical question of whether “China in Africa” is an instance of colonialism, imperialism, a new scramble for Africa, or even hegemony, without engaging or using

the vast and rich conceptual and theoretical resources associated with each of these terms. For instance, there is a century-old literature on imperialism, from Karl Marx to today’s post-colonial theorists, offering insights on a gamut of power mechanisms buttressing the colonial encounter—from political economic domination and complicity of the comprador classes and local elites to the cultural and spatial politics of difference, race, and hybridity, and, lately, the reciprocal constitution of European and colonial knowledge and identities. A similarly interesting repertoire of ideas on “hegemony” has emerged to enrich the conventional international relations (IR) perspective on diplomacy, aid, and loans, seeking to identify the social foundation of domination (the balance of consent and coercion, the alignment of class power, state-capital relation, etc.). Finally, concepts and propositions in the sociology of development can be deployed to illuminate what, if any, new processes are at work, now that investment is moving in a south-to-south rather than north-to-south direction. In any case, without meaningful theoretical motivation and guidance, scholarship cannot rise above ideologically charged rhetorical battles. This is a real and present

danger facing this burgeoning work of China-Africa relations, much of which consists only of inferences from trade and investment statistics, potted histories of diplomacy and policy, or microscopic, biographic narratives of migrants.

Theory and methodology are intimately connected in any field of knowledge production. There are two methodological biases of the current state of China-Africa studies that may be hampering its dialogue with the broader social science literature. First is the prevalent Sino-centricism in scholarship that mirrors the unequal power between China and Africa. Most scholars focus on China-Chinese actors and actions and Chinese interests and intentions and slight the agencies and complicity of African states, labor, civil society, etc. This one-dimensional focus is not conducive to theorizing the various patterns of *interaction* between China and Africa. Relationships, by definition, involve both sides and can only be discovered by painstaking in-depth fieldwork, and not just recycling aggregate statistics or official policy announcements. Second, there is a conspicuous dearth of comparison, the quintessential building block of any social scientific inquiry. Without comparison, we cannot understand let alone explain what is specifically “Chinese” and what is, say, “capitalist” or “global.” The unit of comparison should vary with the theoretical agenda at hand. It can be countries, regions, industries, sectors, time periods, or social classes, types of migrants, etc. No doubt, comparison calls for hard work, but the intellectual payoff will be enormous.

These observations and reflections have flowed from my own research experience in the past five years on Chinese investment in Zambia. Having studied Chinese labor issues in my first two books, I was initially drawn to this topic by the intense international media spotlight on Chinese labor practices in Africa. Once on the ground, I realized labor relations is only one element in a broader set of dynamics constituting the China-Zambia encounter. Scouting the Zambian Copperbelt for research opportunities for the first time in 2007, I was also struck by how it has been internationalized by neoliberal structural adjustment programs and that the Chinese are but one group of foreign investors among many others. From early on, I decided that I needed comparison to get at the peculiarity, if any, of Chinese investment. Comparison had been a central theme in my previous books, so it occurred naturally to me that the globalized Zambian Copperbelt offered a natural site for comparative sociology. From then on, it has been an arduous adventure, filled with utmost frustration and unparalleled rewards.

Basically, my research seeks to answer two questions: What is peculiar about Chinese investment in Zambia? What does it imply for Zambian development? I try to answer these questions by a double comparison: comparing (1) Chinese and non-Chinese capital, and (2) copper and construction. I have completed a total of five months of comparative ethnographic fieldwork in copper mines owned by Chinese, Indian, and Swiss multinationals and conducted more than 150 interviews with managers and workers on construction sites run by

Chinese, South African, and Zambian contractors. For theoretical insights, I triangulate concepts and propositions from several bodies of literature on the social and political mechanisms of “capitalism,” “development,” and “colonialism and postcolonialism.” With this theoretical assemblage, my data and analysis seek to illuminate the distinctiveness of Chinese (versus other, non-Chinese) capital in terms of its logic of accumulation (Marx), regime of production (Gramsci), and ethos of management (Weber), together with the contradictions and limits imposed on it by the political economic realities of Zambia. In short, just as a theoretical sensibility has to be present from the beginning of an investigation, as it guides the choice of research questions, field sites, cases, samples, and methods, a nascent field of knowledge needs to exude, from the moment of inception, a certain level of theoretical aspiration and direction for it to be intellectually sustainable and practically useful.