

Locating African agency in Africa-China relations

An important theme in Africa-China relations that has begun to receive attention in the last year or so is the role of “agency”—specifically, the role of African agency in shaping the dynamics and outcomes of Africa-China engagements. A number of scholars have begun to examine the role and agency of African actors in mediating the increasing engagements between Africa and China.¹ These authors have variously attempted to “uncover” or “reinsert” African agency in Africa-China relations in a way that departs from but also engages with the widely held perception that Chinese actors drive and dominate interactions with their African counterparts. While this body of work has located African agency at the individual and civil society levels and within parts of the African state, it has also cautioned against the tendency to homogenize or reify this agency outside of particular contexts, as the space for African agency varies significantly.²

¹ G. Mohan and B. Lampert, “Negotiating China: Reinserting African Agency into China-Africa Relations,” *African Affairs* 112, no. 446 (2013): 92–110; L. Corkin, *Uncovering African Agency: Angola’s Management of China’s Credit Lines* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013).

² Mohan and Lampert, “Negotiating China.”

My research is situated within this growing body of work. Partly based on field research conducted in Ghana, the current research examines contemporary Ghana-China relations on energy and development to assess the capacity and willingness of Ghanaian actors and institutions to engage Chinese actors for the sake of mutual benefits. I examine the factors and conditions that drive Ghanaian actors and institutions in their engagement with Chinese actors within a broader framework that allows for the possibility to interrogate ways in which such actors express their agency or lack of it in their negotiations and engagements with their Chinese counterparts.

While China’s official engagements with Ghana date back to the 1960s, in the last decade China has become an important player in Ghana’s economy, particularly in its most underdeveloped sector—infrastructure—as well as the nascent oil/gas sector.³ Although Ghana’s relations with traditional Western donors are intact, Chinese loans and grants have become

³ I. Idun-Arkurst, *Ghana’s Relations with China* (Braamfontein, South Africa: South African Institute of International Affairs, 2008); S. Rupp, “Ghana, China, and the Politics of Energy” *African Studies Review* 56, no.1 (2013).

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critical in financing infrastructure projects in Ghana over the past several years. Chinese investment in hydro and gas infrastructure, in particular, and Chinese presence in Ghana's domestic market now weigh greatly on Ghana's future development.

While China's recent aid and infrastructure investment in Ghana may help address the country's infrastructure and other needs, there are increasing concerns about the willingness and capacity of government to harness this opportunity toward Ghanaian-owned development objectives and strategies. Some have criticized the government for collateralizing cocoa and oil in return for credit.⁴ Moreover, at the micro level, there has been evidence of resistance from certain quarters within the Ghanaian public about perceived competition from Chinese traders and miners.

In sum, the agency, responses, and policy positions of African governments and publics in their engagements with Chinese actors are critically important for understanding the nature, extent, and implications of the rapidly growing relations between Africa and China.

⁴ IMANI-Ghana Center for Policy and Education, "The \$3 Billion Loan Is No Easy Panacea," January 2, 2012, <http://www.modernghana.com/news/369821/1/imani-report-the-3-billion-loan-is-no-easy-panacea.html>; see also M. Power, M. Giles, and M. Tan-Mullins, *China's Resource Diplomacy in Africa: Powering Development?* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).