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From Trinkets to Values

China's Engagement in Africa Also Has
an Ideological Dimension

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China's engagement in Africa attracts both enthusiastic proponents and vehement critics. Does Beijing have a master plan for subjugating the entire African continent? What is certain is that Africa is part of China's global strategy, in which disinformation and propaganda appear to be as important when it comes to protecting Chinese interests as trade relations and naval bases.

At the edge of the motorway to O.R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, there is a large billboard. Nobody who drives by can miss it: It depicts a lorry of the Chinese FAW make in dusty surroundings. Rough terrain and the red African sun suggest that this vehicle must stand up to the toughest of conditions. Appropriately, the billboard bears the words "Africa tough". Meaning: China, via its products, is already aware of how to deal with difficulties on the continent. Independent of whether a FAW is a good lorry or not (and experts say that its greatest asset is its low price), this advert demonstrates what distinguishes China's engagement in Africa: its readiness to take on the most adverse conditions, whether they be topographical, cultural, political, or economic. Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, once said that China delivers what Africa needs. The long-time ruler was certainly not only referring to lorries that meet the challenges of African off-road conditions with simple, affordable technology.

The Chinese ability to adapt, the pragmatism of their negotiators, car salesmen, road construction workers, mining experts, and kitchen operators who have gone to Africa over the last twenty years is much appreciated there. This also helps Africans to overlook certain shortcomings, such as the poor quality of many Chinese products, the predatory competition against local suppliers, and the tendency to buy the necessary influence with financial favours towards immigration officials, land registry heads, and ministers.

A few figures indicate that the continent may have been waiting for China's engagement: Up

to one million Chinese are actively involved, not just as merchants, but primarily in mining, building construction, and civil engineering. In 2000, Chinese trade with Africa was just ten billion US dollars; just 14 years later, it has risen to 220 billion. The African countries with the greatest Chinese direct investment – Egypt, Nigeria, Algeria, and South Africa – are regarded as economic centres in Africa due to their good infrastructure or large reserves of raw materials. The recipients of most Chinese loans – Ethiopia and Kenya (besides Angola) – are countries whose historical and economic developments could scarcely be more different from one another. Here, the former empire, which became a socialist country and a dictatorship that is only slowly opening itself to the world; there, the economic centre of East Africa, which has stayed away from all ideological experiments and whose development has suffered only from corruption and massive political intervention. Here as there, the Chinese seem to ask no questions about the past as long as the country and its characteristics are strategically and economically promising. Incidentally, Chinese direct investment in Africa overtook that of the US for the first time in 2016.

In Europe, China has used huge amounts of investment, in Greece and Hungary, for example, to drive wedges into the European Union. Europe's failure to present a united front towards China is a grave error. Is China too important to be criticised? Beijing cares as little about what Europeans think about its engagement in Africa as it does about European reservations regarding its domestic policies. China

knows that the weight and scope of its investments, credit, and infrastructure projects can brush aside any European attempt at gaining economic influence.

A majority of Africans perceive Chinese influence on the continent as a positive one.

German diplomats and representatives of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Kinshasa, Windhoek, or Harare have many stories to tell of how Chinese emissaries are wooed while they themselves, as representatives of the West, struggle to call attention to such concerns as preservation of competition, respect for human rights, and separation of powers.

In Germany and in the Congo

Chinese consumer and household products can today be found in any German household. From the flashlight to the designer lamp to the laptop chip, China is omnipresent. In many Congolese households, it is the pens, bikes, and malaria medication that come from China. And last but not least, the low-cost smartphone. In addition to Chinese construction of football stadiums, roads, and telecommunication infrastructure, that is, to profit-oriented activity, there is also an ideological component of Chinese engagement in Africa that propagates much that the West cannot countenance: single-party states, reduced freedom of speech, and ruthless treatment of minorities.

The pragmatism of the Chinese is viewed with favour by many African governments. This is unsettling to Africa's Western partners. While Europe considers how best to combat the causes of refugee waves (and it is right to do so, even if it does not always apply the correct concepts), the Chinese are building and investing at a pace that causes some African observers to wonder why Beijing can so quickly accomplish things that take years of negotiations with

ministries in Berlin or Paris. Every day, the Chinese, by creating tangible improvements in quality of life, including that of the lower classes, also create reasons to remain on the





Enquiries unwelcome: China now attempts to spread the restrictions of freedom of speech and freedom of the press practiced at home to Africa. [Source: © Carlos Barria, Reuters.](#)

continent. The West can do little to counter this sheer volume of investment. Nor can the West match the prices at which the Chinese build roads, railways, and airports. It is of little

help to point out that a German road in deepest Africa lasts longer than a Chinese one. Despite the manifest Chinese head start, they have not, however, won the people's hearts yet. Promise

and vision continue to come from Europe and the US, not from China.

According to a survey by the opinion research institute Afrobarometer, conducted in 36 African countries in 2015, more than 60 per cent of respondents perceived Chinese influence positively.¹ The Chinese are not familiar with the openness with which they are received in Africa. They neither experience it in Asia, nor in Europe, where people are concerned for their national industries, and for the protection of European values.

One may well wonder whether the Western view of China and of Chinese engagement in Africa represents a case of wishful thinking. The assumption is that China will grow into its role in world politics and fulfil its obligation to provide humanitarian aid; whether or not the assumption is born of the wish, however, is unknown. The Economist Magazine analysed Western misconceptions of China in a March 2018 issue, concluding that the assumption that Western values, such as separation of powers and independent justice will establish themselves in China is fallacious. One way or another it is clear that democratisation from within, resulting from a rising middle class that demands civil liberties, has in any case failed to materialise.²

The increase in repressive tendencies in Africa could further increase the migratory pressure.

Just the opposite appears to have occurred – the dictatorial tendencies in the country, where the president could remain in office for life, might entail precisely the antipode of what we have always hoped. The Chinese reluctance to accept outside suggestions for their country's politics is met with great sympathy by many potentates. In Kinshasa as in Kigali, rulers are tired of hearing from Berlin or the EU or the State Department

that they do not respect human rights, are doing too little to combat corruption, or simply have an outdated view of democracy. Then the Chinese come, look, build, make no political demands, and refrain from questioning the rulers. This pleases the likes of President Kabila of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda's Paul Kagame very much. The latter may purchase his weapons from Israel or the US. But his model of supposed freedom on the internet is an African variant of the Chinese surveillance state: He allows almost all websites and social media, creating the impression of relative freedom, while in fact using these tools for comprehensive nationwide surveillance.

Accounting for African Diversity

It is important for politicians, foundation representatives, and investors to represent Western values. But this representation must be carried out with much more chutzpah and self-confidence if it is going to effectively counter the overly casual Chinese manner in Africa and the brutal selfishness of the representatives of Beijing. There must be more assertiveness and open pride in the achievements of Western democracies. The ever-growing Chinese loans and the new Chinese roads are not the core of the problem. "There are indications that China wants to limit the territorial scope of the liberal system of order for the long term," a study by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) concludes.³ If Africa becomes more Chinese, it will become less free, and repressive tendencies on the continent will be strengthened. This development is worrying in view of the expected population growth and the associated migratory pressure.

Just as the comprehension of Africa is most likely to arise when national differences are taken into account, a nuanced look at China's activities on the continent and at the wide variety of motives for the Chinese to move to Africa is also beneficial. First, there are the merchants, who, with their cheap but useful trinkets have been changing retail trade on the African markets for years. Much like the Chinese

construction workers who, with large sun hats protecting them, asphalt the roads between Entebbe and Kampala, many of these men may often not know exactly where they are. Like many Chinese immigrants, they are looking for business and success.

The biggest group of Chinese on the continent live in South Africa.

Then there are those who got degrees at universities, which do not belong to the first socioeconomic tier; they are looking for opportunities and know that if they display a certain willingness to take risks, they can make something of themselves here as brokers, doctors, or merchants. And finally there is Chinese diplomacy which, with a phenomenal scope of cultural, economic, and military cooperation makes it clear that China is looking for long-term prospects in Africa and does not intend to leave any time soon. Chinese embassies, in Windhoek or Nairobi, for instance, are often enough larger and more modern than those of the US or Russia. There are a total of 52 Chinese diplomatic missions in Africa, almost one in every country on the continent, against 49 for the United States.

The biggest group of the approximately one million Chinese on the continent live in South Africa. More than 300,000 settled there from the People's Republic after the end of Apartheid. Angola is next with about 250,000 Chinese, followed by Madagascar with 100,000. Georgetown University China expert Yoon Jung Park reports that Chinese diplomats are seriously worried about their country's reputation, since many immigrants to Africa are considered uneducated. Park tells of an unnamed Chinese diplomat who said, "These people give me the worst headaches."⁴ Some Chinese are worried about their image as new colonisers who crowd out African merchants and cheat customers, so they support charity work for schools and the needy. The

Chinese ban on the ivory trade is also said to have been imposed out of concern for the public image of the People's Republic on the continent and beyond.

Rapid Development in 30 Years

All of this has only come about since the fall of the Berlin Wall. But it has happened with breathtaking speed. Thirty years after the end of the Cold War between the states of the Warsaw Pact and the West, new ideological struggles are being carried out in Africa. By 1989, African heads of state such as Mobutu Sese Seko in Zaire (in power from 1965 to 1997), Jomo Kenyatta in Kenya (1964 to 1978) and Siad Barre in Somalia (1969 to 1991) were masters at using the ideological struggles of the Cold War to further their own ends. Questions regarding the respect of human rights and tolerance towards the opposition were rarely posed, even by the West, because it seemed more important to prevent losing each respective partner to one's ideological opponent.

At that time, the engagement of the People's Republic of China in Africa consisted mostly of solidarity actions for liberation movements or for states such as Tanzania and Zambia. The TAZARA Railway project is legendary: Chinese engineers worked to make Zambian copper exports independent of ports in South Africa, where the white minority government had imprisoned Nelson Mandela and was touting the superiority of the white race.

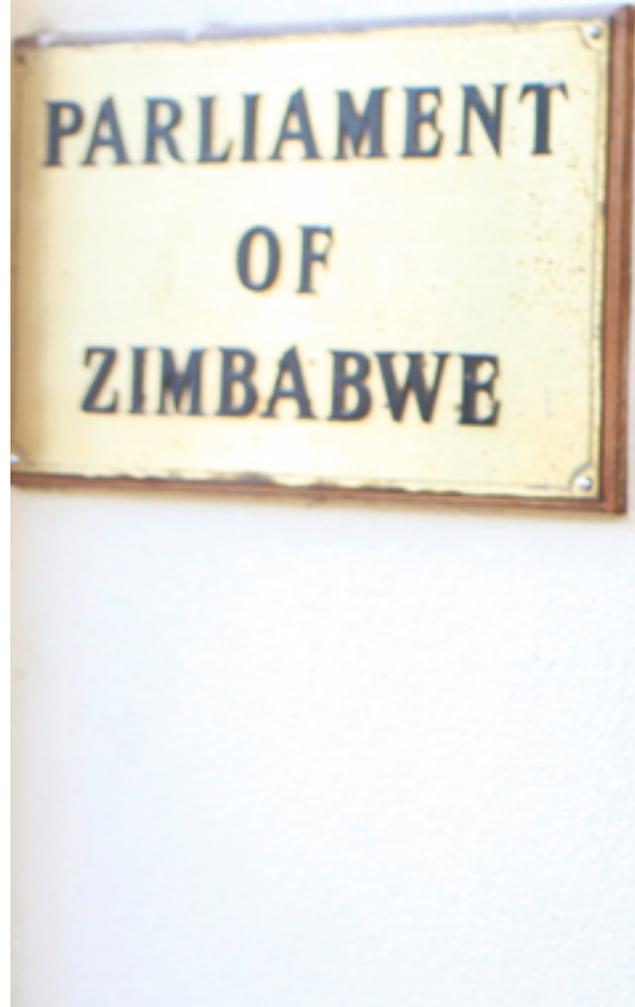
In a true feat of strength, and by means of a masterful performance of the Chinese engineers, the TAZARA was built. At the beginning of the 1980s, there were standardised railway buildings at each tiny station along the line on the long ride from Mbeya in southern Tanzania to the port city of Dar es Salaam where Chinese mechanics in blue Mao suits could be seen. These mechanics with their friendly smiles went along for the journey, tapping axles and nuts during stops at the stations, thereby avoiding intensive contact with travellers and the Zambian and Tanzanian populations as much as possible.

The strategists in London, Bonn, and Washington thought themselves relatively safe in the face of such predominantly solidary involvement on the part of the Chinese. In view of their limited resources, there did not appear to be such a great threat from Beijing. And, strictly speaking, Soviet engagement was merely a military threat, intensified by Cuban intervention in Angola, not an economic or ideological one. In repressive states such as Zaire, Rwanda, and Uganda, Western values such as freedom of speech, separation of powers, and liberality had an allure against which the Soviet Communist Party's propaganda apparatus could do little. On top of that, the Soviets had little to offer economically. Western cars, clothes, and music were always more attractive to the elite than the limited Soviet consumer offerings.

Kenyan President Jomo Kenyatta recognised the limited pull of the Soviet model on his elite early on. It is said that he intentionally sent as many Kenyan students to study in the USSR as possible. He sensed that after spending ascetic years in the Soviet Union, they would return home as steadfast capitalists.

Then the Berlin Wall fell and the USSR collapsed. Cuba had already scaled back its engagement in Africa and was in any case on its own given the loss of Soviet support. Suddenly Bonn, London, and Washington found themselves unchallenged as potential partners for African governments. The USSR was no more. And the People's Republic of China was not yet far enough along. Very quickly, the West put together conditions and criteria for cooperation that presented African partners with great challenges: For instance, Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi was similarly irked by calls for multi-party democracy as Mobutu Sese Seko in what was then Zaire.

From time to time, these rulers probably longed for the good old days of East-West conflict. Their successors today are making good use of the opportunity to do business with the new alternative to the West: the People's Republic of China.



A Struggle About a Way of Life

The Economist Magazine quotes China's President Xi, who, in a speech at the 19th CPC National Congress in 2017, announced "a new option for other countries" regarding "Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind".⁵ This amounts to a declaration of war on traditional Western interests in many corners of the world, including in



Gold rush: The state budget of Zimbabwe can also benefit from Chinese investments. Source: © Philimon Bulawayo, Reuters.

Africa. While people in the capitals fume about the “shithole” comments of the American president, China offers extensive cooperation on an equal footing.

In many cases, this economic cooperation is defined not by quality, but by price and quantity. Chinese industry’s seemingly insatiable demand for oil, ore, agricultural products, and high-grade timber has led to a restrained

gold-rush atmosphere in countries like Zambia and Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe’s ailing tobacco economy is being rebuilt with Chinese help, and the demand of the Chinese market seems endless.⁶

In 2017, the People’s Republic of China opened its own naval base in Djibouti. The current ostensible mission is the protection of international merchant shipping around the Horn of

Africa. But it seems clear that Beijing considers military presence in Africa indispensable for the protection of its investments and citizens on the continent. Since 1978, up to ten million Chinese citizens are said to have moved abroad for extended periods of time. Those who went to New York or Oxford to study are an important minority, but most set off in search of success, business, and prosperity. That brought many to Africa – one million Chinese have emigrated to the continent in the last 20 years.

Since 2017, China has also had a military presence in Africa.

The Chinese are exporters of a globalisation from which they themselves have profited in the last 30 years. Their presence on the continent is, for many, the promise of a bright future, since China has made the leap that many in Africa dream of. This promise is also the great challenge for the West, for the media, and for the work in political communication aimed at defending Western values on the continent.

Wits University in Johannesburg holds regular conferences of Chinese and African academics to take stock of China's progress.⁷ The tough question of who is benefiting from all this engagement is rarely discussed, however. The presence of Chinese academics and representatives of Chinese state media means that much remains between the lines or is not expressed at all. Such topics as "Road to a New Future: The Chinese Built Bingu Highway in Malawi" and "The donkey skins pipeline to China" about the growing trade of African donkey skins for China's pharmaceutical production are preferred. The most important insight is that Chinese engagement on the continent is not uniform, but highly adapted to national and regional conditions. And it is completely apolitical. China is also popular because it does not harm anyone. Their very reporting on African issues is so innocuous and friendly that Western media audiences would at best react with a yawn. Such

reporting is very popular with African heads of state and government. This Chinese pragmatism often makes reference to positive Chinese-influenced journalism and to Western colonial history in Africa.

Competing for Hearts and Minds

This aggressive competition for African minds, the touting of the Chinese model of success, which consists of dictatorship and economic development, only started with the Chinese economic miracle of the 1990s. At that time, Xinhua, China's state news agency, opened offices in Nairobi and Johannesburg, and private as well as semi-governmental media companies also began to focus on Africa, to propagate China's view of the world in English, French, and Portuguese, but also in Arabic and Swahili.

Just as the West long dismissed China's economic commitment as a trade in cheap goods and only very late realised how pragmatically the Chinese had been able to deal with African imponderables, many institutions of educational cooperation and many media outlets did not realise until late how much China had set about shaping the perception of African opinion leaders. This influence is exerted primarily through scholarships, invitations to travel to China, and offers of media cooperation through which texts from Xinhua are offered for reprint free of charge while the offers from Western news agencies are, as a rule, on the expensive side.

Chinese policy is about more than just roads and a naval base. It is about winning the hearts and minds of the people, and exerting significant influence over opinion leaders and decision-makers. Beijing wants "more than to influence the content of news and debates in the long term with their foreign investments in media companies, their offers of think-tank cooperation, and their research projects. Beijing also wants to establish the rules and procedures for political discussion in the long run and as it sees fit", says a study by the German Institute for International and Security Affairs.⁸

One aim of Chinese policy is massive influence on African decision-makers.

When analysing Chinese engagement in Africa, it is important to distinguish between the attempt to win over politicians and those who work in the media. Moreover, as Dr Bob Wekesa of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg emphasises, it is important to differentiate between the effect of Chinese engagement from country to country.⁹ “Wherever democracy is part of the political culture, in places like Kenya and Nigeria, the Chinese will have less success than where democracy is less well established, in places like Uganda or Rwanda,” Dr Wekesa said.

Dr Wekesa is one of those academics from Africa who is familiar with Chinese influence from his own experience. He studied for four years at the Institute for Communication Studies in Beijing, where he earned his doctorate. It was during his stay there that China began trying to gain influence, especially in Africa, developing the tool of “positive journalism”. Positive journalism is a kind of intermediate journalism “in which Chinese thinking is communicated, but clouded over with Western philosophy and concepts,” says Dr Wekesa.

The media expert considers self-censorship to be the greatest danger for those who go to China. This is because, unlike Western scholarships and invitations, such programmes in China entail great pressure to adopt their perspectives; the Chinese expectation for visitors to show political or journalistic gratitude is usually tacitly present.¹⁰

Africa is very much a part of the overall strategy to influence public opinion, Dr Wekesa explains. He thinks that the attempt to keep people from asking critical questions constitutes a threat. When this policy is criticised, the Chinese often cite the alleged Western efforts to achieve hegemony on the African continent, Dr Wekesa recalls. The Economist Magazine recently warned of

the growing “sharp power” of the Chinese in the world, i.e. conscious influence over thinking and opinions. “Counter-intelligence, the law and an independent media are the best protection against subversion” the magazine stated.¹¹

When officials of the African National Congress in South Africa or the ruling Jubilee Alliance in Kenya travel to China for party management training, it is less an expression of ideological affinity than a conscious departure from Western conditionality, which often ties cooperation to compliance with human rights and basic democratic principles.

The failure of the West to consistently insist on such values with all its African partners is now taking its toll. Experience has shown that countries that could help achieve economic and military goals have heard less of such insistence than partners who had little to offer.

What is the optimal response to this? Perhaps the insight that a courageous manner – if both feasible and advisable towards Turkey or the US – may also work with China. But Germany will be able to do this effectively only within the European network. Greater self-confidence, which has definitely grown in recent years in dealings with the US and Russia, is now needed towards China. Pride in things such as democratic achievements, freedom of speech, and the separation of powers may seem audacious in the face of Chinese projects that seem overwhelming considering the sheer number of them. But these Western constructions represent an offer to which there is no alternative for African societies, who are concerned not only with basic needs, but also with freedom and participation.

–translated from German–

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