Call for papers for the Journal *Politique africaine*

**Africa and the economic emergence of China**

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In two recent special issues (December 1999 on the “Afro-Asian Renaissance” and March 2009 on “Globalization from the South(s)” 2009), *Politique Africaine* has offered different perspectives on the strengthening of ties between Asia, Africa and other new emerging powers. This upcoming special issue will take up these reflections and develop them further by focusing on the economic actors of the China-Africa nexus and on the political implications of Chinese investments in and on the African continent.

Relations between China and Africa have attracted growing attention over the past 15 years, following a surge in Chinese investment and the explosion of trade between the two continents. To explain this rapid evolution, academic research first highlighted the importance of new policies adopted by the Chinese government. These policies included support for increased Chinese cooperation with Africa, as well as a set of measures aimed at supporting overseas investments and exports in general, an approach referred to as *zou chu qu* (“going-out”). For many analysts, these policies implemented by the Chinese government since 1999 are a response to the growing national demand in energy and raw materials. The prevailing argument can be summarized as follows: strategic interests linked to the development of China have pushed its government to enact policies promoting investment and strengthening Chinese cooperation with Africa. The term “colonization,” used by certain analysts, is meant to underscore that the Chinese presence in Africa is not only organized, but also the result of a single economic rationality. Drawing on and simplifying Marxist theories of imperialism, these studies claim that the demand for raw materials necessary to China’s economic growth have forced it to venture into this “African odyssey”. The fact that China became a net importer of oil roughly at the same time as its multinationals started to internationalize their activities is further referred to as a “proof” of the uniqueness of the Chinese presence in Africa.

Despite their clarity and straightforwardness, these explanations only offer a partial picture. They fail, for example, to take into account the fact that the Chinese investment boom in Africa has taken place against a backdrop of state-

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owned enterprises reform. This reform called for an exclusive focus on a small number of such enterprises – fewer than 200\(^2\) – which, as a result, found themselves wielding a quasi-monopoly over the Chinese domestic market. For other companies, abandoned by the central government, internationalization proved an effective way to open up new market opportunities and to resist increasingly fierce competition at the national level. This was particularly the case for provincial companies active in the construction and/or mining sectors – the very companies that we now find in Africa. In such a context, it is no longer possible to assert that the Chinese government is forcing “its” companies to invest in Africa in order to meet strategic interests related to the long-term supply of raw materials. Even if some of these enterprises abandoned by the central government are still largely tied to the provinces or municipalities whence they stem, their development strategy is no longer linked directly to the central government’s economic practices. China ceased a long time ago to be a “unitary rational actor”\(^3\) in international relations. Today, Chinese state-owned enterprises are no longer a simple outgrowth of national or provincial authorities. They develop their own strategies to face up to competition, even if it can also happen that they seize opportunities offered by official Chinese cooperation bodies.

Further, the still largely dominant geostrategic perspective is unable to account for the dynamics of the presence of non-state Chinese actors in Africa. In response to this, some researchers, most of them anthropologists, have begun looking at the role of Chinese traders in Africa and, subsequently, at African traders in China\(^4\). Based on extensive fieldwork, their studies focus on migration trajectories as well as on the sociological profiles of traders involved in the sale of Chinese goods, leaving to others the analysis of the evolution of China’s Africa diplomacy.

This view “from below” has made it possible to put back into the picture African actors who had been left out of mainstream research. Prior to this, in such research, “Africa” had not only been poorly defined, but also barely represented. The term “China in Africa” makes it quite explicit that, today still, Africa is above all perceived by analysts as a space, a playing field, in which “China’s strategy”

\(^2\) Today there are 117 industrial groups resulting from the merger of around 2000 enterprises active in sectors considered strategic (energy, mining, transport, construction) and under the supervision of the SASAC [State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council] (www.sasac.gov.cn).


can be deployed. Africa is rarely thought of as an actor and, when it is granted some manner of agency, it is mostly as a victim. However, turning the spotlight on African traders, several studies have shown that African economic actors are sometimes precursors in the trade of Chinese products\(^5\).

Despite the significant contribution of this perspective “from below,” it remains essential to focus on the political and economic implications for Africa of China’s presence on the continent. While avoiding falling back into the “geostrategy trap” criticized above and while preserving the strong empirical character of a view from below, more reflection is needed on the manner in which different types of transnational economic actors fit into the power games and influence struggles that take place in the areas where they operate. We need to interrogate, for instance, the impact that actors of the China-Africa nexus have on the political economy of African states and, more globally, on the extraversion\(^6\) dynamics that characterize these states.

For this special issue, we suggest the following research foci, concentrating on various types of economic actors:

1. Chinese multinationals in Africa

It seems obvious that Chinese multinational companies in sectors such as oil, mining, timber, construction, telecommunications and pharmaceuticals have acquired significant market shares throughout the continent. However, what do we know about these companies? Little attention is focused on them as specific entities, so much so that their very names are hardly ever mentioned. Nonetheless, there is much to learn by focusing on these enterprises. Is a given enterprise a part of the 117 companies that have remained under the supervision of the central government (SASAC) or is it a provincial enterprise? What kind of ownership status does it have? Is it listed on the stock exchange in China or abroad? It is also essential to learn about the history of internationalization and the importance of the African market for each company. Furthermore, how companies operate in Africa is important. What is their internal organization (management of human resources, be they Chinese, local or from still other countries; strategies of training; local recruitment)? What kind of relationships do subsidiaries in Africa maintain with their parent companies in China (autonomy and control of regional directors; modalities of remuneration; other profit-making activities of branch managers)? How do they integrate in their new environment (collaboration or conflict with subcontractors or other multinational companies operating in the same sector; contact with ministries and organization of tenders; relations with trade unions, the media and NGOs)? In order to answer these questions it appears essential to look at everyday life in these companies, so as to break up the monolithic image of state-owned enterprises and to provide a better understanding of the different strategies of Chinese multinationals in Africa.


In addition, even if the relationship between the Chinese government and its companies is more distant and complex than in the past, frequent interactions between them still take place. The Chinese state has (and continues to) put in place numerous measures to encourage overseas investment, including at the provincial level, as provinces have become actors of Chinese foreign policy, especially in promoting regional economic interests; this has been so since the beginning of reforms (1978). While these mechanisms have been studied at the national level, much remains to be learned about the actual influence of these incentive policies on the choice of companies to move to an African country. What is the real impact of these measures beyond the propaganda of the Chinese government? Moreover, it would be useful to know how relationships between the Chinese government and large state enterprises play out on the ground in Africa, whether through formal meetings at the embassy, within associations grouping the senior management of major Chinese companies, or informally on the golf court.

2. New small Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa

Even though they are not visible and draw little attention, many private Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa are active in sectors as diverse as agriculture, fisheries, industry, mining, the hotel business and healthcare. Unlike some highly mobile entrepreneurs such as traders, who are prepared to leave as soon as the economic climate worsens, these small businessmen make larger investments with longer-term perspectives. They typically plan their investments over more extensive periods, often a decade or more. Considering themselves as “settled” in their new environment, they seem to adopt more deliberate integration strategies (through marriage; through building networks with politicians and members of the elite). More generally, as with state-owned enterprises, it would be useful to look more closely at these small private companies, asking a similar set of questions. So far our knowledge about these “new” Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa is very fragmented.

Within this group, medical doctors and owners of private health clinics deserve further attention, as they often acquire a privileged place within society that extends far beyond the health care services they provide. With a clientele often made of members of the local elite, these entrepreneurs are in a position to build up useful networks and to diversify their service provision activities. Their networks can be used, for instance, to speed up the approval process of an application or to settle business disputes. This topic has remained completely unexplored so far.

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3. Network and traders of Chinese products

Although many studies on “Chinese shops” in African cities and the development of African trading ventures in China already exist, it is still possible to broaden the scope of research to cover the commerce in all manner of Chinese products. Whether they operate in Guangzhou, Yiwu, Hong Kong, Dubai or markets in African capitals, traders in these products, regardless of their nationality or country of origin, prove eminently reactive to China’s emergence as a major centre of manufactured goods.

By examining traders and networks along which Chinese products travel, we can move away from a categorization in terms of nationality or ethnicity. In fact, the prevailing Chinese/African dichotomy blurs our vision and prevents us from seeing how traders of Chinese products in Africa compete but also collaborate on grounds that have little to do with national or ethnic origin.

Lastly, it also becomes possible to analyze this phenomenon by considering new commercial and entrepreneurial opportunities offered by the “democratization” of access to certain products. More generally, we need to reflect on the political implications of recent changes in rents linked to the control over imports. In other words, a more political perspective would help identify and understand different modalities of managing the import of Chinese products in various political contexts.

Paper proposals (one page) should be sent to the coordinator (antoine.kernen@unil.ch) by 30 September 2013. Selected articles will have to be submitted to the editorial board of the journal for peer review by March 15, 2014 at the latest. Expected publication date: October 2014.

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