

## **When China met Africa**

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**Are fears of new forms of colonization of Africa by China justified? In a book based on solid investigation and evidence, Deborah Brautigam clears prevailing misconceptions and uncovers the unprecedented realities of China's presence in the African continent.**

Reviewed: Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift. The Real Story of China in Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009. 300 p., 30 €.

Recent years have witnessed a significant proliferation of media, government, and academic interest in China's deepening relationship with the African continent. On the one hand this rapid surge of attention reflects a growing concern triggered by the remarkable acceleration of Sino-African trade relations over the last decade.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, it mirrors and materialises the haste and conviction with which most observers endeavor, and struggle, to fit a new complex, transnational, and multi-layered phenomena into pre-existing patterns of thought, questions and analysis.

The myriad of literature which has swamped the market for breaking global news in recent years, since 2006 in particular, shares at least one common feature. It appears

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, Sino-African trade volumes leaped from \$10 billion USD in 2000 to \$106.8 billion in 2008, a ten-fold increase in less than a decade. Dubbed 'China's Year of Africa', 2006 is a significant year in Sino-African relations as a series of official visits, policy measures and international forums were orchestrated by the Chinese government in Beijing to demonstrate its commitment to pursuing its relationship with the African continent.

that the aim of the game for commentators and newly proclaimed experts is to determine whether China is a coloniser, a competitor, or a collaborator, alternatively all three simultaneously, in its engagement on the African continent. Few observers, however, question the dividing line between these categories and fewer still are asking themselves from where the lines are being drawn in the first place. As a result, readers are regularly served a concoction of unsubstantiated enquiries and misleading diagnosis which are often more effective in relaying national stereotypes than in casting innovative light on new and complex social phenomena. In sum, analysts and commentators nowadays seem to be arguing over the best solution to a predetermined set of problems rather than working together to raise new questions based on a critical engagement with existing debates and extensive empirical investigations conducted in Africa and in China.

### **Dispelling common misconceptions about Chinese aid**

Deborah Brautigam, a Washington based professor who was one of the earliest scholars to examine the issue of China's aid programme to Africa,<sup>2</sup> argues for a more nuanced approach. *The Dragon's Gift* is an attempt to dig beneath the headlines and the hype which have blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction in order to provide a systematic and empirical account of what Chinese aid and state-sponsored economic engagement in Africa are, and what they are not. The thirteen chapters of her book, including the prologue and conclusion, are an exposé of conventional myths about China's engagement with Africa ('its all about oil', 'China is making corruption worse', 'the Chinese don't employ locals') which she attempts to dispel through critical analysis backed with extensive empirical data gathered over almost three decades of research.

*The Dragon's Gift* is a refreshing new contribution to the narrow but expanding field of China-Africa studies for three key reasons. First, Brautigam brings to the surface and cross-examines some of the prevailing assumptions which underline most of the

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<sup>2</sup> See Deborah Brautigam (1998), *Chinese Aid and African Development: Exporting Green Revolution*, New York: St. Martin's Press ; Deborah Brautigam (1997) 'Substituting for the State: Institutions and Industrial Development in Eastern Nigeria', *World Development*, Vol.25, No. 7, pp. 1063-1080; and Deborah Brautigam (2003), "Close Encounters: Chinese Business Networks as Industrial Catalysts in Sub-Saharan Africa", *African Affairs*, 102, pp.447-467.

current analysis and criticism of Chinese activities in Africa. Second, she puts forward one of the rare systematic arguments which seeks to account for Beijing's motivations and strategies in Africa by linking China's national experience with its foreign policy decisions. Third, she combines theoretical analysis with extensive empirical research conducted in China and in several African countries accumulated over several decades. One of the principle merits of *The Dragon's Gift* is the insightful combination of top-down and bottom-up perspectives which help to correct a long standing practice of 'othering' that conceals the internal fragmentation and cultural diversity within both entities called China and Africa which is common practice in media reporting and not uncommon, regrettably, in academic writing. In other words, she has something new to say, and she is saying it a new way.

### **Aid and state-sponsored business activities are not to be confused**

According to Brautigam, part of the problem in assessing China's role on the African continent is linked to a common misperception that conflates Chinese aid and Chinese state-sponsored economic cooperation activities. One of her major arguments is that China is linking aid and business in new and innovative ways by promoting national interests through mutually beneficial partnerships that are being implemented by a large set of diverse and diversifying actors and instruments. The general confusion about China's aid is therefore ultimately linked to the baffling way China structures its economic instruments into accepted and conventional, or exceptional and innovative, forms of aid. For instance, while funds and technical assistance aimed at promoting economic development and welfare in developing countries qualify as aid according to the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the (OECD), export credits as well as certain types of concessional loans which China packages into convenient 'finance bundles' do not (p.165, p.174). It is important to make this distinction because China's export credits are much larger than its aid, but not as large as commonly believed (p.307). In fact, China's aid programme to Africa remains relatively small compared to those of traditional aid donors in the West. According to Brautigam's estimates, in 2007 China's official development assistance (ODA) to Africa was \$1.4 billion USD, in contrast the USA offered \$7.6 billion, France \$4.9 billion and Japan \$2.5 billion in different forms of

aid commitments (p.170-73). It is therefore the growing number of Chinese state-sponsored tools for external economic engagement which are decisive in promoting China's national goals overseas.

### **From a recipient to a donor country**

In order to understand the rationale behind China's strategy and its implications for development in Africa, Brautigam draws our attention to China's domestic history, namely the shifting basis of development during a time of profound structural change. The author's second key argument is that China's role as a donor in Africa has largely grown out of its own domestic experiences with national development and international aid. According to Brautigam, in the unstable period that succeeded Mao's death, Beijing's foreign aid agenda was effectively shaped by two new influences: its own experience as a recipient of international aid, and developmental state politics characteristic of 'Asian Tigers' throughout the 1980s-1990. "As China emerged from the chaos of the Mao years and opened its own door to foreign aid, loans, and investment from the West and Japan, Chinese leaders saw how aid could be mixed with other forms of economic engagement. They observed how wealthy countries ensured that aid would benefit both the donor and the recipient. The content of their aid reflects what they believe worked for their own development. And, surprisingly, much about the way they give aid reflects what they learned from all of us." (p.13).

In sum, China today has swapped places. It has gone from being a recipient country to a donor country and its aid follows a distinctly different set of core ideas about development and the possible ways to achieve it. Through a piece meal process of "crossing the river by feeling the stones" as Deng Xiaoping once famously put it, Chinese leaders effectively discovered that they could leverage what China had (oil and coal in the 1970s-80s, large consumer markets in the 1990s) to attract foreign aid and investment to serve the development and modernisation of the country. More importantly, China has learned many lessons in the process, namely that foreign aid "is a partnership, not a one way transfer of charity" (p.30) and that the sustainability of state-sponsored projects abroad largely depends on local managers having some sort of stake through private

holding. This, Brautigam claims, helps to explain why business interests are being combined with state-driven development politics and why it is worth distinguishing formal aid from the portfolio of financial instruments which are gradually taking a leading role in pushing forward China's foreign policy agenda.

There are two merits to this line of reasoning, as well as one drawback. First, it provides one of the rare arguments which attempts to link China's domestic experiences with its international behaviour. Few foreign policy experts and China or Africa observers have highlighted the benefits of thinking about domestic and international developments together. As a matter of fact, relatively little research has gone into looking at the international implications of domestic experiences which would nevertheless shed insightful light into the decision-making processes and the complex dynamics unfolding between China and African states. By accounting for the experimental nature of China's foreign aid agenda, Brautigam provides a perspective which helps simultaneously explain some of the recent history of Chinese aid while indirectly giving hints on how it may change in the near to medium term future. Being dependent or indirectly linked to national developments, we can expect China's reactive foreign policy to continue to change and adapt against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving domestic economy.

Second, by insisting on the dynamic and reflexive character of Chinese decision makers as well as local development brokers — namely, their ability to base decisions on perceived accumulated experience — Brautigam is one of the rare commentators to account for agency among the plurality of actors involved in the China-Africa dynamic. The Chinese, the Africans as well as the other foreign donors all have a role to play in the China-Africa tension, an aspect that is often overlooked by other commentators. Although her message comes out sporadically in between the vivid chapters of her book, Brautigam ultimately concludes that the developmental impact of Chinese aid and economic cooperation “will almost certainly vary country by country and sector by sector. The deciding factor in each case is likely *not* to be China, but individual African countries and their governments”. (p. 21).

### **Bring complexity back in**

In contrast, the drawback of her argument is that it lacks a convincing theory of the state. Brautigam draws on Chalmers Johnson's model of the developmental state based on his work on Japan in the early 1980s to explain China's 'going global' policy, namely China's efforts to boost the external economic engagement of Chinese companies overseas. By highlighting the possibilities of generating what economist Albert O. Hirschman calls "backward and forward linkages" in local African economies, Brautigam sees China's role in Africa more as that of a potential power leading a flock of flying geese than a communist dictatorship imposing a strict Beijing Consensus (p.194).<sup>3</sup> While the idea of a developmental state may provide some explanatory value for understanding industrial catalysts in Africa, it is not a satisfactory substitute theory for the state.

Theories of the developmental state sometimes run the risk of confusing explanatory variables (i.e. the state apparatus working for development) with the variables that need to be explained (i.e. the state itself and development).<sup>4</sup> It appears that while the central government in Beijing has been reactive and flexible enough to preserve the authoritarian framework which governs China, the decision-making processes and command structures organizing the state apparatus have become increasingly diverse, complex and pluralized in recent years. These tensions and intricate evolutions within the state system itself are not fully appreciated in Brautigam's work, but would have nevertheless been valuable to strengthen her case on the nature of Chinese operations in Africa. For instance often relationships between different Chinese government organs operating in Africa are unaccounted for and the hasty jump from one project to another in several different countries sometimes prevents a larger, more coherent panorama to transpire through the juxtapositions of case studies and descriptions.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'Beijing Consensus' was coined by *Time* magazine's editor Joshua Ramo in 2004 in a report published with the United Kingdom Foreign Policy Centre. The report is available at: [http://joshuaramo.com/\\_files/pdf/The-Beijing-Consensus.pdf](http://joshuaramo.com/_files/pdf/The-Beijing-Consensus.pdf). For a critical discussion of the term see Arif Dirlik's article: 'Beijing Consensus: Beijing "Gongshi". Who Recognizes Whom and to What End?'. The article is available at: <http://www.en.chinaelections.org/uploadfile/200909/20090918025246335.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Richard Boyd and Tak-Wing Ngo (eds.) (2005). *Asian States. Beyond the Developmental State Perspective*, London: Routledge.

In addition, while we learn about the technical details of different projects through the eyes and the voice of the people involved, we only get brief and passing insights into relatively restricted and isolated cases. More extensive detail on each specific project and on the interaction between the people managing state-sponsored projects and other actors on the ground, irrespective of their nationality and state affiliation, would have been welcome in her analysis. It would have sometimes been instructive for instance to learn how Chinese SOEs (state-owned enterprises) are connected or not to the large variety (and large majority) of non-state Chinese actors on the ground. It would have also been interesting to know how local managers feel as so-called representatives of a national policy overseas, what this status means to them and how this status in turn influences or not their own personal and professional relationships in Africa and in China. It may be through these interstitial inter-actions that we catch a glimpse of how new global business leaders operating in transnational networks are gradually forged, trained and reproduced in Africa as well as coming out from China.

Finally, although there is a conscientious effort to provide the historical context in which we can locate the recent evolution of China's engagement with Africa since the end of Maoism, the timescales provided in *The Dragon's Gift* are in fact too short to encompass a discussion with deep historical pretensions. Brautigam's analysis begins in 1976 and efforts to link today's actions with yesterday's past would have benefited, in turn, from a similar historical contextualization of the relatively short period examined in the book (i.e. 1976-2009) within a wider *longue durée* historical perspective. The first chapter of her book is an instructive historical account which explains to the reader, right from the outset, the different origins and trajectories of aid in China and the West and why this has perhaps led to different ideas and notions about aid, its objectives and the means to achieve them. According to Brautigam, the idea of foreign aid "as we know it in the West" has two origins: missionary work — which was later superseded by NGOs and the burgeoning development industry we know today — and colonial welfare and development projects, which later morphed into bilateral government aid agencies (p.22-23). In contrast, Chinese aid has a much more recent history, free from colonial or religious historical entanglements, which has allowed it to be simpler in its content and

more straightforward in its application. Brautigam is one of the rare observers to highlight this crucial difference and she provides us with an invaluable reminder that we cannot understand and analyse two different phenomena rooted in different historical experiences according to the same homogenising temporal and political assumptions.

### **Having an aid programme as a strategy to build a modern state**

Nevertheless, in this comparison Brautigam does not so much explain the origins of Chinese aid as she merely describes its main characteristics. A more perceptive comparison between China and the West concerning historical trajectories would have linked the gradual construction of an international aid programme in the recently established People's Republic of China (1949) with the nascent formation of a modern Chinese state itself. If one way to understand Western aid is to look into colonial history and the role of religion as precursors of changing power strategies over and among global empires, a comparable way to understand the roots of China's aid would be to look at it as one strategy, among others, for a newly established sovereign nation to warrant national cohesion and international recognition through the careful and instrumental mimesis of global strategic power games practiced among aspiring — and rapidly evolving — nations since the end of the Second World War. In other words, in order to grasp a deeper sense of the longer historical trends and structural changes in China (as well as in Africa) today, one might have to start the analysis earlier than the reform era of the 1970s and the Mao era which preceded it (1949-76) and instead consider the trials and tribulations of China's recent international aid agenda in Africa as only one, or rather the latest, endeavour in a long, arduous and unpredictable self-proclaimed journey towards modernisation defined in terms of modern statehood.

If judged on its own terms *The Dragon's Gift* does what it sets out to do. It is a clear analysis of Chinese aid and state-sponsored economic activities which seek to dispel common misperceptions that pervade existing debates. Through a fast paced and entertaining style which reflects the speed and directedness of unfolding realities in Africa and in China, Brautigam paints an exciting picture of an unprecedented phenomenon, despite what prevailing views claim. The thrust of her argument is both



clear and highly relevant and will certainly open the door for new exciting future research on the topic.

**Further reading:**

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