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Introduction. China-Africa Relations: Interdisciplinary Question and Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract

The study of China-Africa relations has been approached from a wide array of disciplines. Three theoretical perspectives are now common in the literature: Realism, Liberalism and Social Constructivism. Realism sees China's engagement in Africa as driven by its national interest centred on economic and geo-strategic interests, liberalism views the engagement in Africa as a consequence of globalization rooted in China's domestic modernization programme that began in the late 1970s. Social constructivism draws inspiration from historical interaction between China and Africa, viewing the engagement as shaped by identities and shared interests over time. Whereas these perspectives have been useful in understanding China's diverse engagement in Africa, they have paid a lot of attention on Chinese agency – centering on how all-powerful China subjugates weak African states. The question of how Africa is represented in the engagement was the main subject matter that was widely discussed at the conference and some of the papers are published in this Special Issue. This introductory article surveys these theoretical perspectives with a view of providing a comprehensive understanding of China-Africa relations.

Keywords

Africa – agency – China – liberalism – realism – social constructivism

1 Introduction

In a recently published book, *Competition and Compromise among Chinese Actors in Africa*, Niall Duggan asserts that “Sino-African relationship, and therefore China’s foreign policy towards Africa, is all-encompassing and deals in all areas of human exchange, such as economic cooperation, social and cultural exchange, and military interaction” (Duggan, 2020: 9). Because of this, Sino-Africa relations has been approached by many scholars from different disciplines such as Anthropology, Business, Development Studies, International Relations, Economics, Political Science and Sociology.

Development studies, for instance focuses on China’s development footprint in Africa (cf. Kaplinsky, 2008), viewing the engagement as consisting of a set of intertwined modes of interaction, mainly trade, investment and aid. Studies in this discipline focus on trends and patterns of economic relationships (cf. Jenkins et al., 2008; Kaplinsky and Morris, 2008). The modes of interactions have tended to be treated in isolation from politics. A majority of international relations scholars have either focused on Sino-US relations (cf. Kai, 2009; Liu, 2009; Wu, 2012) or Sino-Japanese relations (cf. Fan, 2008; Goodman, 2013; Dreyer, 2012) or Sino-Russian relations (cf. Chenghong, 2007). Political scientists focusing on Chinese politics look at the prospects for democratic transition (cf. Chin, 2018; Guo and Stradiotto, 2019; Schmitter, 2019). Because of this disciplinary divide, we have seen few political scientists and International Relation scholars engaging “with the development studies community or those concerned with core issues of development, such as well-being and equity and environmental sustainability. We thus need an interdisciplinary approach to understand China” (Mohan, 2013: 1257) – Africa relations.

It is this clamor for interdisciplinary approach that informed the Department of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Nairobi to organize inaugural conference on China-Africa Relations on 17–18 October 2019. With the theme “*From Sino-Africa to Afro-China Engagements in the 21st Century: Emerging Interdisciplinary Issues and Research Gaps*”, under the auspices of University Research Week Initiative 2019, the two days conference brought together academic researchers from different fields, policymakers, political activists, media practitioners, representatives of civil society organizations for stimulating discussions on China’s engagement in Africa. The conference sought to appreciate interdisciplinary perspective in the study of China-Africa relations and discuss China’s Africa policy in the implementation of Africa’s Agenda 2063.

At the end of the call for papers, the organizing committee received 56 abstracts from a wide array of disciplines in social sciences. These papers were

later reviewed, and 46 papers accepted for presentation were later organized into 11 Panels as follows: China versus the West; Chinese agency versus African agency; China and environmental conservation; China and democracy in Africa; China, peace and security in Africa; China's trade, debt and foreign direct investments (FDIs) in Africa; African perceptions towards China's model of development; China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); China and Indian Ocean Region; China-Africa cultural interaction and China's public diplomacy in Africa. We noted that whereas some Panels featured predominantly one discipline (Political Science), others cut across many disciplines raising the need to offer interdisciplinary interpretations of China-Africa relations. In heeding Duggan's call that "it is difficult to present overall trends within the literature of Sino-Africa relations without placing studies into broad [theoretical] classifications" (Duggan, 2020: 9), this introductory article attempts to organize a wide array of interpretation revealed during the conference into the following broad theoretical perspectives.

2 Surveying Theoretical Perspectives

Panels on China versus the West, China's trade, debt and foreign direct investments in Africa, China's Belt and Road Initiative and China and Indian Ocean Region predominantly revealed realist perspective. This perspective sees China's engagement in Africa as driven by its national interest centred on economic interests and geo-strategic interests. The quest for natural resources to maintain economic growth and sustain energy security has been cited as the motivating factor (cf. Mensah, 2010; Naidu and Davies, 2006; Rotberg, 2008; Tull, 2006). For instance, Mensah (2010: 96) observes that "China's insatiable drive for resources to power its economic engine as it emerges as a new global economic powerhouse has led the country to pursue an aggressive foreign policy engagement on the African continent ... a far cry from the autarchic impulse of China's relationship with the international system during the pre-1978 period under Mao Zedong". The acquisition of natural resources has been made possible through application of China's five principles of peaceful co-existence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit. In addition, China's self-proclaimed Africa's "all-weather friend" operating within the South-South framework attractive to African elites allergic to intrusive policy transfers from the West has also dominated rhetoric of Chinese policy-makers (Duggan, 2020: 10). The Panel on China's trade, debt and FDI in Africa in particular discussed how aid, trade and investment

policies are used as means to achieve Chinese national interest in Africa. The Panel on China and democracy highlighted that because of huge demands for natural resource China is able to go extra mile to financially support autocratic regimes in resource endowed countries at all costs, thereby eroding democratic gains in the continent.

China's threat narrative popularized by alarmist realists was evident on the Panel on China versus the West with discussions centering on how China's presence in the continent is challenging western players who traditionally perceived Africa as their sphere of influence (Mohan, 2013: 1255). Echoing, Berger and Wissenbach (2007) observation that "so far [China's presence] has mainly been felt by the Europeans, who increasingly have seen their regional and local policies strategically and effectively undermined by China", substantial discussions centred on how the Chinese presence on the continent is challenging the US hegemony. It was observed that after the end of the Cold War the US focused so much on democratic promotion in Africa which never picked up as expected. Then in post 9/11 the US spent considerable time and resources in the Middle East leaving a vacuum that China filled at the turn of 21st century.

Recent developments like opening military base in Djibouti (Barton, 2018: 413) featured on the Panel on China, peace and security where presenters questioned whether China's military overtures in the continent is likely to erode the US peace promotion initiatives. It was speculated that just like in Asia-Pacific region where China has increased its role in security (Noguchi, 2011), similar initiatives in Africa could be viewed as training grounds to its superpower ambitions. That if the US fails to control China in Africa, as Malaquias (2005: 193) reminds us, this may have spillover effects in other developing world, thereby allowing China to leverage on its "significant and rapidly growing power to counterbalance global American power and carve a more central position for itself in the world – from which it can extract the international resources required to maintain recent economic growth levels at home – thus enhancing its security". However, given that the US has also strategic interests in Africa and considering that the two countries "have each been largely absorbed in their separate, respective spheres, enlarging their presence and investment in Africa, with little systematic or substantive reference to the other (Gill et al., 2007: 14), China's desire to expand its engagement in Africa will inevitably find itself into conflict with the US (cf. Bernstein and Munro, 1997).

Like realist perspective, liberal view also cut across many panels mainly on China and democracy in Africa; China, peace and security in Africa; China's trade, debt and FDI in Africa and China's BRI. As a theoretical perspective that explains how domestic variables influence state's policy preference (Legro and Moravcsik, 1999; Moravcsik, 1997), liberal view of China's engagement in Africa

is rooted in China's domestic modernization programme that began in the late 1970s. The outcome of these economic reforms saw China increase its role in the global economy in 1980s and 1990s, so much that by the turn of 21st century the growth of Chinese market led to improved prices of primary commodities as well as improved demands of agricultural products driving China's interest in Africa because:

the continent [was seen as providing] new markets and investment opportunities for China's growing economy. The ever-growing range of imports from China, varying from shoes and textiles to high-tech goods, [began] flooding African markets ... African consumers, whose purchasing power [had] sharply declined during the economic crisis and economic liberalization, [began appreciating] these relatively cheap goods in spite of regular complaints about their quality to Western products (Konings, 2007: 355).

Some papers on the Panel on China's trade, debt and FDI in Africa especially on trade sought to counter realist narrative that China is merely involved in extraction of natural resources from Africa arguing that cheap Chinese commodities have increased accessibility to many households who would not have otherwise afforded expensive commodities. Still, some papers on this Panel reported similar findings to a study commissioned by the African Economic Research Consortium (cf. Khan and Baye, 2008; Moshi and Mtui, 2008; Onjala, 2008) and research conducted by Raphael Kaplinsky and Mike Morris (2009) revealing that Chinese firms both state-owned enterprises (SoEs) and private ones were fairly distributed in infrastructural, construction and agricultural sectors, with similar presence in small and medium enterprises. Along similar line observed by African Center for Economic Transformation (2009: 8), it was also reported that most small scale Chinese firms are entrepreneurs who have been pushed from China because of excessive surplus and stiff competition.

Unlike the realist perspective that sees Chinese companies as solely driven by the quest to access natural resources, the liberal perspective views Chinese companies as driven by the same motives as other western companies. In fact, proponents of this view argue that Chinese companies are too young to compete on the same footing as Western companies, and therefore given that African continent possesses low-cost markets, this allows them to gradually develop their capacity to also become global economic players (Corkin, 2008; Haglund, 2009). Some papers on Panel on China's BRI demonstrated that through BRI the Chinese state plays a key role in promoting these companies by offering subsidies and diplomatic support. By offering support, the

Chinese state takes a strategic long-term view of the investment. Crucially, Corkin (2008: 130) observes that “the long-term view of the Chinese government allows [SoEs] to invest in strategic acquisitions that may not yield short-term projects, but may render returns in the long terms, especially given rising commodity prices”. The liberal perspective also believes that Chinese companies in Africa are likely to improve African markets through “spin-off effect”, whereby the companies offer business opportunities for local companies consequently linking them to global supply chain (Duggan, 2020: 16). In the same vein, a strong China-Africa economic ties is likely to have spillover effect to other areas like peace initiative in the continent. Given that China would prefer a stable environment for economic propensity for survival and legitimacy of Chinese Community Party (CCP) (Ayson, 2005), it would be in the interest of China to promote peace in Africa so as to secure trade links and investment environment.

Following Andrews-Speed and Dannreuther (2011), Lee (2006) and Taylor (2014) and Hodzi’s (2018: 201) observation that “political elites from African countries have merely replaced their dependency on aid from Western countries with dependency on bilateral concessionary loans and development assistance from China”, there was attempt by some presenters to view Chinese activities using dependency theory. It was observed that because of extraction of natural resources (cf. Taylor, 2014), trade imbalance (cf. Kaplinsky, 2008; Taylor, 2010; Sindzingre, 2013) and debt sustainability debates (cf. Brautigam and Hwang, 2016; Were, 2018) associated with Western colonialism in the 19th century, China-Africa relations is likely to reproduce North-South dependency, in a way that the growth of African countries will be a reflection of growth and expansion of China. However, some participants in the conference were quick to point out that the crux of dependency theory which advances the argument on inequality between the North and the South was the historical interaction during colonialism and its legacy, and that is not applicable in China-Africa relations. China does not possess any imperial vestiges in Africa as colonialism does with the west. Indeed, moderate observers (cf. Holslag, 2006) have argued that in terms of scopes and magnitude, China is not comparable to western power, but it is pursuing an approach whereby the Chinese state supports its national champions to have a strong footing in resource-rich countries so that China can maintain economic growth and sustain energy security. As discussed under liberal perspective, it was noted that Africa has not been relegated to mere supplier of raw materials similar to exploitative North-South relations. “While China possesses the main industrial productive capacity in this engagement, there are opportunities for Africa to also engage in productive activities within the engagement” (Aybebi and Virtanen, 2017: 443).

Featuring on Panels on African perceptions toward China's model of development; China-Africa cultural interaction and China's public diplomacy in Africa was social constructivism. As a theoretical perspective that explains how ideational factors such as identities, norms and ideas constituted by social interaction shape state behaviour (Checkel, 1998; Wendt, 1999), social constructivist explanation is rooted in the historical interaction between China and Africa, that has paved way for the formation of certain identity that has subsequently shaped their interests. Social constructivism is further divided into three approaches; namely, historical approach, critical epistemologies approach and domestic factor approach. Historical approach holds that China-Africa relations can be explained by understanding the historical interaction between China and Africa beyond power balance and economic interests (Liu, 2007; Jianjun, 2008). The Panel on China-Africa cultural relations elaborated on this perspective, arguing that the current China and Africa relations is set to follow patterns and trends defined by historical interaction. As Alden and Alves (2008: 43) observe "one of the most notable features of the forging of China's new activist foreign policy towards Africa is its emphasis on the historical context of the relationship. These invocations of the past, stretching back to the 15th century but rife with references to events in the 19th century and the Cold War period, are regular features of Chinese diplomacy in Africa". This is further corroborated by Strauss (2009: 777) view that "despite the burgeoning layers of complexity in China's involvement in Africa, a set of surprisingly long-lived principles of non-interference, mutuality, friendship, non-conditional aid and analogous suffering at the hands of imperialism from the early 1960s to the present continue to be propagated".

Critical epistemological approach shows how culture, history and language may promote dialogue on China-Africa relations in ways that realist and liberal perspectives do not. For instance, Zhang (2010) illustrates how China's renewed engagement with Africa has changed perception of the continent in international relations. Drawing insights from realist and liberal perspectives, this approach has identified two narratives, namely; the view that China's presence in Africa has negative effect (influenced by realist persuasion) and the view that China has positive effect (influenced by liberal persuasion). The former views the rhetoric of South-South cooperation, win-win situations as simply a cover for an overall grand strategy to increase China's influence in Africa. Proponents of this approach examine the power dynamics between China and Africa from the point of view of various actors. For instance, Gadzala (2010) illustrates how labour disputes between firms and their local workers in Zambia propagated negative sentiments about Chinese actions in Africa even as the Chinese government strove to put in place corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Domestic factor approach holds that critical to comprehending China-Africa relations is the understanding of China's domestic factors and motivations. Proponents of this approach look at China's foreign policy making process, specifically the actors involved and their interests. Proponents of this approach look at China's foreign policy making process, specifically the actors involved and their interest as key in defining China-Africa relations. As Taylor (2009) observes, China is not a monolithic political structure and that Beijing policy-makers do not control the actions of all Chinese actors in Africa. Particular Chinese actors have their own individual interests in Africa rather than adhering to an overall China-Africa policy. Due to large number of Chinese actors abroad, "and the highly politicized nature of state organizations at every level of government means that the central leadership is in a perpetual struggle to keep up with an economy surging beyond its control, whether domestically or when this is projected overseas" (Taylor and Yuhua, 2009). As such "China's officials are scrambling to keep abreast with the new realities created by Chinese companies doing business and investing abroad" (Jakobson, 2009: 426). This has created a dense network of Chinese actors in Africa (Raine, 2009), resulting to conflict over access to limited resources and pursuing different policy goals. Conflict may arise over prioritization of foreign projects in Africa versus domestic goals. It is no wonder, Raine (2009: 91) observed that there is no coherent Chinese strategy for Africa:

Just as there is no singular, coherent and agreed strategy for Africa, neither is there one for any individual countries agreed among key Chinese institutions of state, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce. Particularly on the ground in Africa, where relations are complicated by the interactions of private and state owned commerce, the reality of "China's Africa policy" is far more multidimensional than is often assumed.

Similar sentiments have been expressed by Chris Alden and Christopher Hughes (2009: 14) noting that "when analyzing a relationship like that between China and Africa, the tendency to take the state as the main unit of analysis can rightly be criticized for neglecting that "China" is anything but a unitary actors". As China gets interlinked in Africa, it will not be able to fully control the activities of its actors because the number of interactions will be too many producing complex patterns of interactions.

What unites the above theoretical perspectives is the primacy of Chinese agency in explaining China-Africa relations. The concept of agency as used in this literature donates a kind of political conduct related to a sense of choice,

free will and autonomy (Vadrot, 2017: 63). It has also been viewed as the ability of actors to reflect upon their actions and the context within which they operate (Hay, 2002: 94) which is close to Chabal's (2009: 7) conceptualization of agency as "directed, meaningful, intentional and self-reflective social action". Understood this way, the pre-eminence of Chinese agency assumes that it is only Chinese actors pushing and achieving their desired outcomes in the engagement with African actors even though some analyses have acknowledged Chinese actors as being highly adaptive and flexible in dealing with African actors (cf. Alden and Large, 2011; Carmody and Taylor, 2010). The main weakness in the above theoretical perspectives is that they overshadow the role of African actors in understanding China-Africa relations. African actors are "spoken *of* or spoken *for*" (Mohan, 2013: 1257) in all the analyses. In favourable accounts, African political elites feature in analyses of bilateral relations (cf. Large, 2008) or in western reportage where one horrifying instance is extrapolated to the whole continent (cf. Junger, 2007).

Scholars questioning the peripheral role of African actors in China-Africa relations draw their intellectual inspiration from the works of Thompson and Zartman (1975), Jackson and Rosberg (1982), Clapham (1996), Bayart and Ellis (2000) and Harman and Brown (2013) who observe that indeed African agency has been evident in international relations. For instance, Jackson and Rosberg (1982) and Clapham (1996) argue that juridical sovereignty allowed weak African states to manoeuvre in international systems dominated by powerful states. More recently, it has been argued that scholars viewing African actors as lacking agency ignore the fact that the continent is heterogeneous with different states and non-state actors with different abilities (Chipaike and Bischoff, 2018). Thus, the current China's engagement in Africa presents opportunity to bring back African agency in international relations as discussed on the Panel on Chinese agency versus African agency.

Pioneering work on African agency within China-African relations focused on the role of African political elites in directing China's engagement in the interests of African states. As such, discussions have centred on how African political elites utilize the presence of China to not only bargain with traditional western donors, but also obtain concessions from China (cf. Taylor, 2014). Corkin (2013) uncovers how Angolan elites managed to obtain concession from Chinese actors by forcing them to participate in the oil industry on Angolan terms. China's domestic demand for oil saw Angolan elites peg the prices of oil on the international prices thereby directing Chinese elites to adhere to their terms. In Ivory Coast, the government set condition for Sinohydro in 2017 after awarding it a \$ 558 million power contract. French was agreed to be the working language, Chinese labour was accepted at 20 per cent of

the total workforce; all materials were to be sourced locally (Soule-Kondou, 2019). In Tanzania, President John Magufuli quashed the contract of \$10 billion Bagamoyo megaport project. The government saw the following terms as punitive: Tanzania would not develop any other port until Bagamoyo was completed; Chinese investors would receive generous tax holidays in the proposed special economic zones and a 99-year management lease of the port would be extended to China Merchants Holding International (*The Straits Times*, 2018). Magufuli opposed the terms calling them “exploitative and awkward”, warning Chinese “not to treat [Tanzanians] like school children”. Later, the government re-opened negotiations: a 33-year lease instead of the original 99 years; Chinese investors were to be subjected to tax regime similar to other foreign investors, and if it so wished Tanzania would develop new ports in competition with Bagamoyo (*The Straits Times*, 2018).

Drawing insights from Ghana and Nigeria, Lambert and Mohan (2015) argue that African agency goes beyond state level to encompass ordinary individuals, traders and non-state actors. In Kenya, during the construction of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR-Phase One), President Uhuru Kenyatta was forced to publicly declare 40 per cent local content in the project after sustained pressure from trade unions. According to Mohan and Lambert (2012) an important site where African agency is manifested in China-Africa relations is at the interface between Chinese investors and African political elites. At this interface, “we see the emergence of what can be described as patron-client relations. Significantly, it is the African actors who occupy the ascendant role of patron, utilizing their locally-embedded social, economic and political resources to facilitate and support the activities of their Chinese clients, who in turn reciprocate with financial rewards, the provisions of services and mutually-beneficial business opportunities” (Mohan and Lambert, 2012: 4). Crucially, Clapham (2008: 364) had earlier observed that the “[o]ne very important reason why China’s involvement in Africa has been so widely welcomed and readily accommodated has been that it fits so nearly into the familiar patterns of rentier statehood and politics with which Africa’s rulers have been accustomed to maintain themselves” [so that] “far from providing any new model for Africa’s involvement in the global economy and political system, China’s role has been precisely to reinforce the old one”. This neo-patrimonial network in China-Africa relations was evident in the construction of the SGR whereby a big chunk of logistics contracts issued by the Chinese partners were controlled by powerful businessmen with political connection (Wang and Wissenbach, 2019: 11).

Therefore, “the need to move beyond statist, elite dialogues is not simply a theoretical exercise, but one made more pressing by this growing ‘embeddness’

of mutual political and economic ties” (Mohan and Lambert, 2012: 9). In other words, African agency in China-Africa relations is now understood as a multi-faceted in nature comprising “state representative ... civil society, private sector, students, traders and the generality of the African public among other actors should be subjects of study’ (Chipaike and Bischoff, 2019: 4).

These theoretical perspectives are elaborated in nine articles selected for this Special Issue. The authors were requested to revise their papers for competitive selection process. After selection the papers were submitted to the Chief Editor of this journal who later led peer-review process where after authors were requested to respond to comments from reviewers.

3 The Articles

Each of the nine articles in this issue aims to address questions around China-Africa engagement in the 21st century. The opening article by Joseph Onjala, “A Transition from Win-Win to “Win-Lose” Outcome in Africa’s Trade with China: A Case of In-depth Assessment of Kenya’s Exports”, addresses the potential of a win-win trade between Kenya and China. In particular, the article addresses two important questions: Which of Kenya’s export products have the potential to succeed in the Chinese market? and what is the export supply response capacity for merchandize product in Kenya to exploit the opportunity?. The author establishes that Kenya is confined to a narrow range of merchandize export products (coconut hemp, black tea, tanned or crust hides, cut flowers, tanned skins of ship, tanned hides of bovine, fish fillet, nuts fresh or dried, coffee, textile fibres). He further establishes that export supply response capacity for the merchandise export remain very low. The author concludes that despite existing opportunities for expanding exports to Kenya, the prospects for win-win outcome for Kenya within the framework of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) remains bleak.

Closer to trade, is the investment theme taken further by Hangwei Li and Gilbert Siame in their article “Nature and Impact of Chinese and South Africa Investments on the Development of the City of Lusaka” where the authors compare the impact of Chinese and South African investments on the development of Zambian capital city of Lusaka. The authors employ Colin McFarlane’s concept of assemblage to offer critical reflections of how diverse forms of human and non-human agencies transform cities. Whereas Chinese investments are predominantly in intensive government-related projects, South African investments are privately owned and predominantly in the retail and real estate sectors. The authors argue that the two geo-economic powers have

created a particular kind of city assemblages that will continue to create even wider socio-spatial gap among the city residents. Although recent years have witnessed growth, it is largely skewed in favour of political and economic elites because the investments from the two countries are not strong enough to address “both inherited and newly created social and spatial injustices in Lusaka”. This is so because whereas South African investments look for profitable opportunities, Chinese investments do not respect development needs of locals resulting to increased social and spatial polarization in the city of Lusaka.

Oita Etyang and Simon Panyako's article, “China's Footprint in Africa's Peace and Security: The Contending views” expands on the notion that China's increasing role in Africa security is informed by the desire to protect investment opportunities, trade markets and geo-strategic interests. However, the propensity by African countries to purchase cheap arms from China, the authors argue is likely to exacerbate conflicts in Africa. To sustain peace and security cooperation between China and Africa, African agency needs to be effected under the framework of the African Union.

Since many states have historically depended on coastline for the expansion of trade links and economic growth, in their contribution “The Dragon March into the Indian Ocean Region: Implications on International Trade”, Fred Jonyo and Samuel Mbutu demonstrate how China attempts to asserts itself in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The authors expose China's Indian Ocean policy in terms of China's forays into the region via building maritime infrastructure both across the Indian Ocean littoral as well as expanding ocean claims and capacities. What is not lost in their analysis is that in light of maritime challenges like terrorism, the US influence in the region and competition from India, China has become assertive in the region with far reaching implications for international trade. China has directed its energy towards having alternative routes to chokepoints in the regions viewed as strategic routes where critical supplies to its domestic economic development must pass. In a reversed manner, Paul Odhiambo's article “China's geostrategic interests in the Indian Ocean Region: Implications for Kenya”, examines the growing presence of China in IOR and how Nairobi engagement with Beijing could enable Kenya to realized its geo-strategic interests in the Indian Ocean

An area that has been neglected in China-Africa cooperation, and which is advanced by Alice Oluoko-Odingo and Elias Ayiamba in the article, “Food Security in the Afro-China Cooperation: The Untapped ‘Win-Win’ Partnership”, is food security for all and sustainable agriculture. Optimistic that this may be corrected, the authors examine the influence of China policy in Africa in terms of the existing opportunities for collaboration. They identify guaranteeing local and national food justice and food sovereignty, climate change

adaptation, agro-processing and job creation, research and technology as well as development of fisheries as some of the opportunities that could enhance food security and sustainable agriculture in the Afro-China cooperation.

In light of growing scholarly interest in BRI, Keren Zhu, Rafiq Dossani and Jeffiner Bouey's article, "Addressing Impact Evaluation Gaps in BRI Projects in Africa" proposes an Interim Framework for assessing the impact of BRI projects in Africa at the design, negotiation and evaluation phases. Based on the existing BRI evaluation framework and the areas of challenges common to BRI projects across the world, the proposed framework consider the following areas for assessment: trade and connectivity; local economic development; security and geopolitical risks; project identity; local enterprises; local labour inclusion; technological transfer; regulations and compliance; financial sustainability; environmental sustainability; social and community sustainability; health and wellbeing.

BRI is further explored in Evaristus Irandu and Hesbon Owilla's article "The Economic Implication of Belt and Road Initiative in the Development of Railway Transport Infrastructure in Africa: The Case of the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya". The authors revisit potential economic benefits and risks that the SGR may bring to Kenya. They argue that the construction of the SGR has created employment to locals and created business opportunities in counties it passes. The train stations could lead to the establishment of special economic zones or industrial parks likely to promote industrial development as well as promote agricultural production in counties along the route. They also reveal that the SGR has improved efficiency of freight transport by shortening lead time between Mombasa and Nairobi. However, like other Chinese mega-projects in Africa, the SGR has been surrounded with controversies including economic viability, cost, debt sustainability, corruption, opaque contracting and financing arrangements.

The last article by Paul Nantulya "Understanding China's Strategic Application of Soft Power with Specific Reference to Africa" expands on China's cultural diplomacy in Africa. Departing from the traditional approach where Chinese soft power is understood through the lenses of Western strategy, the author looks at soft power from the perspective of Chinese political thought. Nantulya discusses the rise in number of Confucius Institutes in Africa, African students in China, youth and leadership training for African politicians, media, academia and civil society as some of the growing repertoires of Chinese soft power in Africa. However, the author observes that the application of Chinese soft power is challenged by implementation strategies. Key among them "China does not appear to have the incentive of enforcing strict merit-based criteria for selecting beneficiaries ... the sheer number of

opportunities on offer and the multiplicity of actors involved in distributing them ... makes it virtually impossible to establish a centralized system of selection and follow-up". Therefore, it has been difficult to assess the impact of Chinese soft power in Africa.

4 Conclusion

Evidently, China-Africa relations cut across several facets of society and has been approached from a wide array of disciplines. The nine articles were written by authors from Development Studies, Economics, Geography and Environmental Studies, International studies, Political Science and Urban Planning with a bearing on at least one of the three theoretical interpretations of China-Africa relations, and this introductory article has condensed them into two broad classifications: Chinese agency and African agency explanations. Should the focus then be on Chinese agency or African agency? While some articles have exclusively focused on either, some have appreciated both. While not exhaustive, the articles in this Special Issue collectively provide insight into China's renewed engagement that began at the turn of 21st century. In their totality, the articles urge readers to avoid the tendency of understanding China-Africa relations as one sided: It is both sided. On behalf of the conference organizing committee, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Editor-in-Chief of *The African Review* for accepting our request to publish conference papers as special issue in the journal.

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