

Theorizing Sino-African Relations: A Constructivist Perspective

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Abstract

Studies of contemporary Sino-African relations often display two perspectives, which also happen to be dominant in the field of international relations. One is zero-sum and informed by realism and Marxism, viewing Sino-African relations as evocative of European colonialism in the late 19th century. The other perspective is positive-sum and rooted in (neo)liberalism, which is sometimes coated with a Chinese flavor (Sino-neoliberalism). China-centric initiatives, such as One Belt One Road (OBOR), are emblematic of this outlook, according to which both China and Africa stand to benefit from greater cooperation (so-called win-win). This article counteroffers a broadly constructivist approach to Marxist-realist-liberal discourses on Sino-African relations, which are too structurally deterministic and, by implication, insufficiently agential and intersubjective. The article summarizes Marxism, realism, and liberalism, demonstrating where and why they fall short. It highlights constructivism as theory. It examines the history of Sino-African relations from 1957 to 2018 from the constructivist perspective, to validate the central argument: i.e., constructivism shines a brighter light on Sino-African relations than the other theories.

Keywords: Marxism, liberalism, realism, constructivism, globalization

1. Introduction

Studies of contemporary Sino-African relations often display two perspectives, which also happen to be dominant in the field of international relations. One is zero-sum and informed by realism and Marxism, viewing Sino-African relations as a ‘second scramble’ reminiscent of European colonialism in the late 19th century. The *raison d’être* of Chinese involvement in Africa in this rendering is either economic exploitation (Marxism) or power and influence (realism), the realization of which is likely to result, respectively, in further impoverishment and geopolitical subservience of the African continent. The other perspective is positive-sum and rooted in (neo)liberalism, which is sometimes coated with a Chinese flavor (henceforth Sino-neoliberalism). China-centric initiatives, such as One Belt One Road (OBOR), are emblematic of this outlook, according to which both China and Africa stand to benefit from greater cooperation (so-called win-win). This article counter offers a broadly constructivist approach to Marxist-realist-liberal discourses, which are a historical and structurally deterministic, therefore, providing only partial explanations of Sino-African relations. Specifically, these theories embed Sino-African intercourse in a logic of state action variously manifested, overlooking non-state actors who, for better or worse, have always played a key role in African international relations: e.g., Cecil Rhodes in southern Africa in the late 19th century; small, privately-owned, Chinese firms in 21st-century Africa; African traders in Guangzhou, southern China, in 2018; the 1 million-plus Chinese citizens currently living in Africa, etc. The multifacetedness of Sino-African interaction calls for a theoretical approach that combines structure and agency of all types, as well as being sensitive to the intersubjectivity of social reality. Constructivism is that theory, affording a more complete understanding of Sino-African relations than its competitors, yet not rejecting them outright. The article is organized as follows. It summarizes Marxism, realism, and liberalism (also called idealism), demonstrating where and why they fall short. It highlights constructivism as theory.

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It examines the history of Sino-African relations from 1957 to 2018 from the constructivist perspective, to validate the central argument: i.e., constructivism shines a brighter light on Sino-African relations than the other theories. Theoretical questions are, ipso facto, epistemological questions. Ultimately, the article aligns the structural asymmetry in relations between the world's second largest national economy and its most developmentally challenged continent with the agent-driven changes in the "logic of appropriateness" that have shaped crossborder relations since the end of World War I. This approach reinforces that in a complex world knowledge-making must transcend single-cause (cookie-cutter) epistemologies to develop frameworks that are multi-causal and intersubjective, yet also historically and empirically grounded. While constructivism does not reinvent the proverbial wheel, it forces rethinking of its revolution.

2. Marxism, Realism, Liberalism (Idealism)

Marxism probably provides the strongest theoretical underpinning for the idea that Africa is undergoing a second colonialism. Marxism is basically a conflict theory of social relations, consisting of several branches. In classical Marxism, the protagonists are divided between capitalists and workers, with the state serving as a kind of 'executive committee' of the former in its fight with the latter for the maximization and appropriation of surplus value (profit). Here social conflicts are localized. However, they become transcendent for a variety of reasons. According to Marxism-Leninism, capitalism creates monopolies that are not only too big to fail, but also too big to be contained within national borders (Lenin 1939). These firms become so-called multinational corporations (MNCs) as home markets become saturated, causing the rate of profit to fall. To blunt the problem, monopoly capital, now consisting of industrial firms and banks, tries to capture new markets for finished products, find new sources of raw materials, and relocate productive assets overseas (direct foreign investment). Capital mobility wrought by the downward trajectory of the rate of profit compels states and monopoly capital to intertwine. In this way, problems between monopoly capital from different countries become interstate problems and ultimately imperialist wars. Hence imperialism is capitalism in its monopoly phase, which is dominated by finance capital. An argument in either the classical Marxist or Marxist-Leninist tradition would be hard to sustain, inasmuch as Sino-African relations harken back to a time (the 1950s) when China was stridently anti-capitalist and private Chinese firms were essentially small, family-owned enterprises, not the globe-trotting, monopolistic behemoths imagined by the theory. Even if Sino-African relations are historicized from 2000 to the present, a purely Marxist explanation remains problematic, as it is far from clear that the trajectory of 'exploitation' inherent to capitalist production leans consistently against Africa and in favor of China. As will be demonstrated later, the balance of trade between China and Africa, since China's opening to the world, shows a mixed picture. Inasmuch as Chinese involvement in Africa also entails fixed assets (infrastructure) that cannot be carted off, Sino-African economic relations are not strictly extractive; furthermore, even if these assets imply a heavy debt burden by African countries, they can be used to attract future investment on more attractive terms—in sum, they improve the quantity, quality, and diversity of Africa's capital stock.

Offshoots of Marxism (neo-Marxism), such as dependency theory and world system theory, assert that there is basically one capitalist world economy in which countries are split between a core, which specializes in the production of industrial goods, and a periphery, which supplies raw materials (Frank 1967). Core countries exploit peripheral ones through unequal terms of trade, which are sometimes mediated by semi-peripheral countries (Wallerstein 1979). Dependency and world system theorists would argue that China, in spite of its claim of pursuing so-called socialism with Chinese characteristics, is a capitalist country, which must be situated, if not in the core, certainly in the semi-periphery. That China's most important trading partners in Africa are (ostensibly) natural resource-rich countries, from which it buys raw materials and to which it sells consumer and capital goods, would be, for dependency and world system theorists, a tell-tale sign of Africa's neo-colonial relationship with China. Post-colonialism would agree on this point, stressing the endurance of colonial forms of power. It would see the rise of China in Africa as a replacement to Western (neo-)colonialism on the continent. As a group, Marxists would downplay the absence of overt, pro-China, client states in Africa, since what is important is the capitalist structure of the international political economy, not which faction of the local bourgeoisie is formally in power in the periphery. Neo-Marxism makes one important contribution to our understanding of Sino-African relations, namely, these relations are but one facet of the larger process of capitalism's expansion, which China recently joined in a major way. In other words, dependency theory and world system theory force synoptic thinking, but precisely because of this predilection for gargantuanism, there is a danger of missing important nuances wrought by atomic forces.

Colonialism in the late 19th century and Sino-African relations in the 21st century may be underwritten by capitalism's expansion (tamefully known as globalization), but it is not trivial that African elites, who lead sovereign states, are decision makers contemporarily, whereas their forebears during the colonial period were little more than bystanders to European reallocation of African assets (Frynas and Paulo 2006). Time often compels change in the operation of social systems via political struggle and technological innovation. Agrarian capitalism normalized buying and selling human beings, industrial capitalism only commodifies labor power and may end up doing away with it altogether. Slavery and wage labor are integral to the history of capitalist production, but it matters whether one is a slave or a worker. Marxism has structure right but wrongly assumes it is determining. It is too blunt a theoretical instrument to capture the complexity of relations between a continent of 55 nominally sovereign states (give or take) and a major world power, which has been the object of widespread suspicion and cannot be insensitive to how it is perceived, given its own history.

The central concern of realism is so-called national interest, which essentially has to do with state power and security. "Whatever the aims of international politics, (state) power are always the immediate aim" (Morgenthau 1955: 25). Realists are categorical in their belief that the (anarchic) structure of the international state system and the inability of states to be certain they will not end up with neighbors with hostile intent—the security dilemma—are the only drivers of state behavior (Mearsheimer 2014). Maximum state power leads to maximum security (and with it survival); unfortunately, the more power acquired by one state, the less there is of it available for others. Hence, power is at zero-sum premium. In the realist imagination, the lack of harmony of interest among nation-states leads to perpetual competition for power. Neo-realism, an obvious offshoot of realism, stresses full-spectrum security, which includes economic security. The logic of behavior in neo-realism remains power and (or) security, which is facilitated by state capabilities. State capabilities can be assessed in terms of "size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence" (Waltz 1979). Neo-realists would probably agree with Marxists that China is a capitalist country, and they would view this as significant, but they would deny that market expansion is the overriding factor in Chinese foreign policy. They would give primacy to the security interest of the Chinese state, which is connected to the economy but not reducible to it. Realism and neo-realism are right in one major way: every state must look after its own interest in a world of no overarching government (anarchy). However, it is wrong to assume this structure will always give way to selfish, zero-sum, behavior. Cooperation is made possible by comparative, not absolute, advantage, and the former is probably more common than the latter. The case for realism in contemporary Sino-African relations is simply not supported by the facts, as they exist at the time of writing. Chinese military presence in Africa, as reflected in military bases and so-called mutual defense agreements, is greatly out of sync with Beijing's official financial commitment to the continent. China has no history of sphere of influence on the African continent, either by dint of history (colonialism) or culture. It has generally shown respect for the sovereignty of African countries. Simply put, Sino-African relations may be shaped more by commercial than security reasons, although it is possible to imagine convergence at some point in the future (e.g., if or when African debt to China becomes unsustainable, and China insists on controlling African strategic assets, such as seaports and airports, as a form of debt repayment).

At the heart of (Kantian) liberalism or idealism is the notion that the guiding principles of a political community should also be reflected in its foreign policy. Furthermore, liberalism champions cooperation in interstate relations, especially among like-minded (i.e., democratic and so-called peace-loving) partners, through international institutions. For liberals or political idealists, interstate conflicts stem not from the anarchy of the international state system and the inherent selfishness and aggressiveness of man, but, rather, from poorly-designed institutions. Liberalism accepts that states remain the most important units in the international system, but the (anarchic) structure of that system does not necessarily condition state behavior. Cooperation wrought by well-designed institutions makes international relations a positive-sum game. A more aggressive liberalism emerged in the 1990s (i.e., liberal imperialism), in the wake of the demise of the Soviet-led bloc, the unleashing of ethno-nationalism in Eastern Europe, and the unravelling of weak states in the Third World. Rooted in Wilsonian liberalism, it supports so-called humanitarian intervention, which led to a new norm in international relations: Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Liberal imperialism stresses the realist sacred cow of power, but also liberal values, such as human rights, democracy, and peace, even at the barrel of the gun. Economic neoliberalism advocates economic growth, free trade, open economies, and a reduced role for the state in the economy. Sino-neoliberalism accepts the aforementioned tenets of economic neoliberalism, except the last one. Because of China's own history and the continued role of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the economy, Chinese policy has displayed ambivalence toward the role of the state in the economy.

Sino-neoliberalism views China-centric international initiatives as win-win propositions without imperial ambitions. China thinks that helping the African continent to develop will be good for the people of Africa and China, which is strangely evocative of Lord Lugard's Dual Mandate rhetoric.

Liberalism enhances understanding of international relations, by paying attention to agency in addition to structure. When liberals speak of well-designed institutions as responses to anarchy, they are really underscoring the importance of agency, since institutions do not build themselves. However, they downplay agency, and for a good reason. Liberalism, too, evinces a marked bias for structure. The institutions of which liberals are so fond come across as idols to be worshipped, as if they have the same signification to everyone, when clearly they do not (exhibit A: the International Criminal Court). A related problem with liberalism is that its assertions are not necessarily premised on facts, always a signature weakness of any theory. Thus, democratic states are not necessarily peaceful, as democratic peace theory asserts. Since World War II, most interstate wars have involved at least one liberal democratic state (Danziger 2013). Economic neoliberalism has produced very unequal gains. The deep wounds it inflicted on Africa through structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in the 1980s are still being sutured. As Carmody (2016:22-23) correctly points out, "SAPs were meant to (re)integrate Africa into the global economy, thereby reviving its economy. Structural adjustment was notably unsuccessful in achieving its objective of economic diversification and poverty alleviation, however." There is little evidence to suggest that economic growth rates in Africa in the first two decades of the 21st century are due to anything other than higher commodity prices, which have in the past returned to more realistic equilibrium levels. Economic neoliberalism, including Sino-neoliberalism in Africa, is not transformative of economies. Furthermore, it has a jaundiced view of economic history. Most developed countries did not become so through free trade. The transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, which played a significant role in the development of Europe, were hardly paragons of unfettered economic exchange (Rodney 1972). Mercantilism has underwritten the economic policies of nations far more frequently than classical liberalism. Also, the best economic performers of the second half of the 20th century were not democracies. In sum, the factual record of (neo)liberalism leaves much to be desired, making the theory a woeful tool for understanding Sino-African relations, lest it is turned into dogma or ideology.

3. Constructivism

Constructivism is not easy to define, as it is composed of many strands. However, there are some key ideas at the heart of constructivism. One is that humans, while clearly influenced by the environment (structure), are not captive of it. Physical and social constraints can be overcome by human ingenuity (as reflected in the development of science and technology) and, for lack of a better word, will: i.e., striving, effort, hard work, persistence. These traits can be subsumed under agency, which demarcates constructivism from the structural determinism of Marxism and realism, making humans key actors in their own drama, constrained by structure, to be sure, but not completely shackled. The centrality of agency and structure in constructivist thought is projected in Alexander Wendt's "Anarchy is what States Make of it" (1992: 391). So constructivists may agree with realists on the (anarchic) structure of the international system but leave it up to actors (state elites) to make what they will of that structure. By implication, constructivists are willing to consider a variety of options in response to the condition of anarchy, including selfish behavior by states but also more cooperative comportment. The point is, humans have choices, no matter the structural constraints. Another main idea in constructivism as it relates to international relations is stressed by one of the architects of the theory: "Constructivism is about human consciousness and its role in international life" (Ruggie 1998: 856). Thus, constructivism emphasizes the importance of ideas and language, the means by which ideas are communicated and reality is socially constructed. Reality is material, but, more importantly, it is also ideational.

Britain's nuclear arsenal has not been countered by balance of terror by America, because Britain has been an ally since redcoats burned down the White House in 1814. For constructivists, reality does not have an existence separate from the interpretations of humans; it is, once again, socially constructed and infused with meaning, which, in turn, is informed by the ideas and beliefs actors hold. In the ontology of constructivism, "material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded" (Wendt 1995: 73). In other words, social structures are determined primarily by shared ideas; purposive actions are the results of these shared ideas, rather than imposed by nature (Wendt 1999). The same structure may mean different things to different people, occasioning different (re)action, which may end up changing the structure. It is, therefore, possible to accept structural theories, such as Marxism, realism and, yes, liberalism, without being held hostage by their determinism.

This can be done, by bringing agency back in. In sum, constructivism is a social (not a substantive) theory that brings together agents and structures. It is in the same mold as rational choice theory, which explores how humans in a particular social framework that is constraining attempt to maximize preferences (Barnett 2017).

Admittedly, constructivism is not perfect. Its fuzziness comes from the indeterminacy with which constructivists use key concepts, such as identity and interest, in contrast with the purported clarity of the meaning of these same concepts among structural theorists. When Marxists say interest, it is understood they are referring to profit by the bourgeoisie, whether on a local or global scale. Likewise, realists conceive of interest as state pursuit of power in a world of *chacun pour soi* (self-help). Interest can be anything in constructivism, since it is interpretive or subjective. But this is not an insurmountable problem. Constructivists can make the meaning of key concepts very clear from the start. They can also provide the measurement tools for their concepts, so hypotheses can be tested. Constructivism has also been accused of being empirically challenged. This criticism, too, is not inherent to the theory. In this article, data concerning foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade are used to make the case against the competing theories and, by implication, for constructivism. Data, after all, lend themselves as much to interpretation or meaning as historical events. To properly study Sino-African relations, it is necessary to examine how China and Africa have been constructed and reconstructed over time by agents acting under the influence of changing ideas and structural conditions. Thus, Sino-African relations are explored from the mid-twentieth century to the present in phases: 1955-1960, 1961-1979, 1980-1999, 2000-2018. Each of these phases corresponds to a specific construction of China by its elite, which led to particular policies. The approach, then, is historical and empirical; it is also constructivist in the sense that narratives of Sino-African relations combine agential and structural, ideational and material, factors, in contrast to the competing schools of thought, which use only one of the levels of analysis. Constructivism, once again, does not substitute one reality (e.g., anarchy in interstate relations) with its own; rather, it asks: what is the meaning of reality for actors in a given time and space? Intersubjectivity, "the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals," may be norm-preserving or norm-altering (Scheff et al 2006).

4. Sino-African Relations: 1955-1960

International relations are shaped by structural factors that do not have the same meaning to agents spread across different dimensions (namely: time and space). International relations, then, are informed by realities that are largely constructed by humans, not handed down in the manner of the Ten Commandments by the Most High: i.e., as *faits accomplis*. In a nutshell, this is what constructivism asserts, and the history of modern Sino-African relations broadly confirms its veracity. The Afro-Asian Conference of Heads of States and Governments, held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955, can be seen as the beginning of those relations, which, therefore, predate decolonization in sub-Saharan Africa. During this period, China's influence in world affairs was weak. Under the circumstance, China latched its wagon to the Soviet train. Thus, the first Five-Year Economic Plan of 1952 adopted the Soviet model of development, to revive an economy in tatters, hopefully with Soviet assistance. China also closely aligned its foreign policy with that of the former Soviet Union, a reflection of its relatively weak position on the international scene, but also a refutation of the realist position that interstate relations are basically a zero-sum struggle for power. The Chinese elite in those days imagined China to be part of a worldwide ideological movement toward communism, whose inexorable victory China stood to benefit from, as did other like-minded countries. So much did Mao Zedong apparently believe in this idea that, when Khrushchev promised the Soviet economy would catch up with the U.S. in industrial output in 15 years, Mao, not one to be left out of an ideological *mêlée*, set for the Chinese economy the more modest goal of catching up with England over the same period of time. Ideology can suture the anarchy of the international system: i.e., it facilitates alliances, which, in turn, makes anarchy more manageable. At the same time, China was loath to support the ideological transformation of world politics by violent means, not only because it lacked military power but also the USSR, on which it was heavily dependent, had settled on a policy of peaceful coexistence with the West. (The contradiction here should be readily apparent: the victory of communism over capitalism was inevitable, but the two systems could peacefully coexist!) The Cold War of the 1950s replaced the balance of power of the alliance system of the 19th century with the balance of terror of the nuclear age. However, because balance of terror (a material condition) was suffused with an ideology (international communism) that (on paper) transcended nationalism, China did not see a powerful Soviet Union on its doorstep with trepidation and may have been even willing to jettison its national interest for a larger cause. This is the only way to make sense of Chinese foreign policy in the 1950s; none of the other theories makes much sense.

China's construction of itself had consequences for its Africa policy. In Algeria, on the eve of the Toussaint Rouge (November 1, 1954), widely considered the start of the Franco-Algerian war, the People's Daily (Jen-min Jih-pao), the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party, essentially edged on Chinese support for the Algerians by editorializing that differences between Algerian nationalists and the French "could only be settled by peaceful negotiation based on respect for Algerian independence and sovereignty" (SCMP 1956: 33). This was in direct contradiction of Mao's professed support for "just wars," but in line with the Geneva Conference a few months earlier, which advocated peaceful coexistence. China's Africa policy during this time was not only fairly conservative and non-confrontational, it was also almost completely non-commercial. The nominal value of total trade between China and Egypt stood at 4 million USD in 1958, the first African country with which Beijing established diplomatic ties; direct foreign investment from China was entirely missing, although China had pledged to invest in the textile industry of Egypt. Socioeconomic exploitation did not underwrite Sino-African relations early on any more than power politics. Until 2017, China did not have a military presence in Africa, namely, in Djibouti, which also leases territory for 3 more military bases controlled by Western forces. It is entirely possible that China's decision to subcontract its foreign policy to the Soviet Union in the 1950s was based on *realpolitik*, that is to say, informed by its lack of power in the international system and the expectation that the USSR would put it under its nuclear umbrella. This conjecture strengthens, not weakens, the case for constructivism. For what is important in constructivism is not the nature of policy (constructivism can accommodate both realism or idealism), but rather how it is made (i.e., by a combination of structural conditions and how actors interpret those conditions).

A constructivist approach implies that the behavior of actors in the international system is more much determining and elastic than the structural theories let on, and, relatedly, that ideas can occasion important policy change, even when structure remains unchanged. Thus, by 1957 the abysmal results of the first Five-Year Economic Plan may have sown doubt in Mao's mind about the appropriateness of the Soviet model for China. He was also critical of Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in September 1956, ushering in de-Stalinization. As if on cue, the Hungarian uprising started a month later. China attacked the islands of Quemoy and Matsu in August 1958, which were controlled by Taiwan. In response, the U.S. pledged to defend those islands and Taiwan, even threatening to use nuclear weapons; meanwhile, Khrushchev had refused to make a similar commitment to China, by putting it under the Soviet nuclear umbrella (Ogunsanwo 1974). All of these geopolitical developments may have led Mao to reconstruct China. But there is more to the story than that, in fact, much more. While China was materially weak in the 1950s, Mao fancied himself a giant of communist ideology. The victory of the Communist Party in China posed a fundamental challenge to Marxist orthodoxy, which had envisaged that the transition to socialism would be led by working classes in the most advanced capitalist countries of the West. Mao had shown a route to socialism led by peasants. Given the similarities between China then and much of the still-colonized Third World, Mao, not Khrushchev, was the 'natural' leader of international communism (in Mao's eyes).

The luxury is lacking in these pages to cover, even with parsimony, all the instances in the late 1950s and early 1960s in which ideology was at the center of conflicts between China and the former USSR. The most vitriolic disagreement was perhaps the one that took place at the congress of the Romanian Communist Party in 1960 between Khrushchev, who denounced Mao as a "nationalist, adventurist, and deviationist" (all three equivalent of apostasy in Marxist-Leninist doctrine), and politburo member Pen Zhong, who retorted that the Soviet leader was "a revisionist, patriarchal, arbitrary, and tyrannical ruler" (Axelrod 2009). One cannot separate ideological battles from material battles, especially for a worldview as theological or doctrinaire as Marxism. The two forms of conflict played a key role in the reconstruction of China in the late 1950s. China would adopt its own model of development in the Great Leap Forward, abandoning the Soviet model adopted in the first Five-Year Plan of 1952. It would cease to subcontract its foreign policy to the former Soviet Union; indeed. China would also develop its own nuclear facilities, which at one point the Soviets considered bombing (a move discouraged, ironically enough, by the US). A realist might look at these events and erupt into self-congratulation; a constructivist might have a better reason for cheering. Widely shared ideas and beliefs (intersubjectivity) lead to social norms or "standards of appropriate behaviour for actors within a given identity" (Katzenstein 1996: 5). The schism between China and the USSR could be seen as the product of the breakdown of those standards of appropriate behavior among communist countries. So, which explanation is stronger here, the one that cannot explain change in the face of stasis in structure (realism) or the one that does because it does not consider ideas epiphenomenal (constructivism)? China's foreign policy change could be seen, once again, in Algeria. It provided financial and military aid to the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in 1957.

In September 1958, it recognized the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (PGAR). From this point onward, it would become China's policy to outdo the Soviet Union in Africa, to demonstrate to Africans that China was a more reliable and natural friend than the Soviets (Scalapino, 1964a). So by 1960s nothing had changed structurally in world politics. What did change was elite idea of China's place in the world, which led to significant change in China's foreign policy in general and its Africa policy in particular, precisely what constructivism asserts.

6. Sino-African Relations: 1961-1979

This is the era of Chinese activism in Africa, coinciding with China's most revolutionary, and often destabilizing, phase. China began this period steeped in Maoist orthodoxy and ended it as a reformer of communist ideology and practice. The driving forces behind these shifting constructions are internal Chinese politics, most spectacularly the Cultural Revolution and the leadership struggle between the Gang of Four and Deng Xiaoping after Mao's death, and international politics, in particular: Chinese perception of an unreliable Soviet Union as an ally, Chinese effort at integrating the UN while isolating Taiwan, a resurgent Vietnam after the war, and a chastened but still powerful U.S. with which China could forge an informal alliance. The reader should note that all of these factors are essentially subjective in nature but informed by objective (structural) factors. Political developments in Africa itself, including the rise and rapid fall of promising leaders (Patrice Lumumba of Congo and Félix-Roland Moumié of Cameroon), provided additional lessons. In sum, this period demonstrates, in sharp relief, the contingent nature of China's Africa policy, and, by implication, the importance of agency and idea in the policy making process. Structure obviously matters, as constructivism acknowledges, but how human agency reads (or interprets) structure, in order to act upon it, matters even more. In spite of all the chatter about Sino-African relations in the second decade of the 21st century, this is arguably the most important period in the history of these relations for at least three reasons. One, more African countries became independent during this time than any other in the 20th century. From the bounty of decolonization China could harvest as many allies in Africa as possible, as the continent became home to the largest contingent of new states at the UN. China became a veto-wielding permanent member of the UN Security Council, thanks in part to support from African countries. Two, it was during this period that China, for the first time, articulated a foreign aid doctrine aimed principally at Africa, elements of which would subsequently inform Chinese commercial relations. Three, economic reforms initiated at the end of this period paved the way for sustainable development, which made it possible for China to potentially become the most prominent foreign actor on the African continent. Chinese behavior in Africa evinces an ability to adjust to changing circumstances, as interpreted by Chinese state elites. To prove the point, events in Equatorial Africa are examined next.

Patrice Lumumba was without question one of the rising stars of African nationalism in the early 1960s. China counted on him to score a diplomatic breakthrough in the heart of Africa. After the murder of Lumumba in January 1961, China established diplomatic relations with the pro-Lumumba government of Antoine Gizenga in Stanleyville (Kisangani) but did not send an (ad interim) ambassador, Chang T'ung, until seven months later in July 1961. When Gizenga made peace with Cyril Adoula, premier of the central government in Leopoldville (Kinshasa) at the First Conference of Non-Aligned States on September 12, 1961, hope by pro-Lumumba forces to take over the whole of Congo was dashed. Instead, the Stanleyville government was dissolved. China's gamble on Lumumba and the Lumumbists had failed to pay off, but China also lost very little in the tohu-bohu of Congolese politics. It could have presumably sent an envoy to Stanleyville more quickly, who might have persuaded Gizenga not to rush into an agreement with Adoula, in return for Chinese aid to strengthen his government. China did not lend practical support to a government to which it had extended diplomatic support, because it had concluded that Congo had become too fractured for Chinese diplomacy to be effective. China was willing to support the Lumumbists, but not if this meant sending its diplomats, military and economic aid into a situation where a successful outcome was uncertain. When an ambassador did land in Stanleyville, he was appointed on an ad interim basis and was evacuated nearly as quickly as he had arrived on 16 September 1961, or four days after the Gizenga-Adoula accord.

Chinese diplomacy showed the same deftness (some might say: opportunism) in Cameroon, where its support for the Union des Populations du Cameroun (UPC) continued after the assassination Félix-Roland Moumié in 1960. However, it took China less than three months after the public execution of Moumié's principal successor, Ernest Ouandié, to establish diplomatic relations with the government of Ahmadou Ahidjo in March 1971. The alacrity and timing were not coincidental. China needed Cameroon's support to assume control of the 'Chinese' seat at the UN Security Council. But so were Sino-Cameroon relations devoid of material payoffs that Chinese workers would not erect the Palais des Congrès on one of the hills of Yaoundé until 1982.

As important as this period is in the history of Sino-African relations, there is almost zero evidence that exploitation of Africa's resources played a role in the calculus of Chinese policy makers. China in those days simply did not construct its international relations in economic terms. Its economy was not yet sufficiently embedded in the global capitalist system, to which it was, in fact, hostile, to seek financial returns on its diplomacy. A realist conjecture is not factually supported here either. Although China provided support to various forces during this time, including some unsavory ones (UNITA in Angola), it did not cultivate openly pro-Chinese régimes. Ideology and strategic advantage were the main drivers of Chinese foreign policy. The contradictions between these two values often required China to show flexibility in its foreign policy, as revealed in the examples previously discussed. China wanted to present itself as an alternative to the two superpowers in the Third World, even as it crafted an informal alliance with its former enemy (the US) against its former friend (USSR). In Africa, Beijing supported national liberation forces, but was not bashful at establishing diplomatic relations with governments fighting those same forces when doing so helped its cause at the UN and its effort to isolate Taiwan.

In the area of foreign aid, the Chinese third way, so to speak, entailed encrusting development assistance in a theory and practices that clearly delineated China from the two superpowers. Premier and Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai articulated Chinese foreign aid doctrine in Mali in 1963-64. It is worth reproducing the statement at length here, because foreign aid, limited as it was then, was one of the principal instruments of China's Africa policy. According to Zhou Enlai, the Chinese government strictly lived by eight rules, where foreign aid was concerned:

First, the Chinese Government always bases itself on the principle of equality and mutual benefit in providing aid to other countries. It never regards such aid as a kind of unilateral alms but as something mutual. Through such aid the friendly emerging countries gradually develop their own national economy, free themselves from colonial control and strengthen the anti-imperialist forces in the world. This is in itself a tremendous support to China.

Second, in providing aid to other countries, the Chinese Government strictly respects the sovereignty of the recipient countries, and never asks for any privileges or attaches any conditions.

Third, the Chinese Government provides economic aid in the form of interest-free or low-interest loans and extends the limit for the repayment so as to lighten the burden of the recipient countries as far as possible.

Fourth, in providing aid to other countries, the purpose of the Chinese Government is not to make recipient countries dependent on China but to help them embark on the road of self-reliance step by step.

Fifth, the Chinese Government tries its best to help the recipient countries build projects which require less investment while yielding quicker results, so that the recipient governments may increase their income and accumulate capital.

Sixth, the Chinese Government provides the best-quality equipment and material of its own manufacture at international market prices. If the equipment and material provided by the Chinese Government are not up to the agreed specifications and quality, the Chinese Government undertakes to replace them.

Seventh, in giving any particular assistance, the Chinese Government will see to it that the personnel of the recipient country fully master such technique.

Eight, the experts dispatched by the Chinese Government to help in construction in the recipient countries will have the same standard of living as the experts of the recipient country. The Chinese experts are not allowed to make any special demands or enjoy any special amenities (Wilson Center n.d.).

High-minded rhetoric by one of the ablest diplomats of the 20th century to obfuscate the organized hypocrisy of international relations? Perhaps. The eight rules were also Chinese grievances against Soviet aid before the schism, which China was using to underwrite policy in the African theatre; they were not just words (Scalapino 1964b). In 1965 China offered to build the TAZARA Railway linking Dar es Salaam to KapiriMposhi near the copper belt of Zambia's Central Province. At 500 million USD (3.08 billion USD in 2015 value), this was the largest foreign aid project undertaken by China in the world. At the time of completion in 1975, the 1,160 miles of tracks running through some of the most rugged and diverse ecosystems in Africa were considered the most impressive feat of civil engineering since World War II. China provided 100 percent financing for the project at zero interest rate, forgiving 50 percent of this interest-free loan in 2011, after the 30-year period had been extended. Although it never reached full capacity, TAZARA Railway was capable of transporting 5 million metric tons of bulk trade, theoretically allowing landlocked Zambia to reduce its dependence on rail services controlled by the white-minority régimes then in power in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa.

Little of Zambia's copper went to China at the time and Tanzania essentially had an agrarian economy centered around peasant collective production (*ujamaa*). China had no military assets in either country. Over a dozen Chinese workers died during construction, partly because they were living in the modest conditions that Zhou Enlai had prescribed. Zhou stressed the need for countries receiving Chinese aid "to free themselves from colonial control and strengthen the anti-imperialist forces in the world. This is in itself a tremendous support to China." Ideology played an important role in China's Africa policy during this time, but was not necessarily the only factor. China sometimes jettisoned ideology for pragmatism, as we showed earlier; other times, the two were complementary. Thus, when the TAZARA Railway project was launched in January 1967, 13 African countries had diplomatic relations with China, by 1971, 21 had done so, and by 1979, that number had increased to 31. Africa also provided the largest bloc of affirmative votes (26) to China's accession as a permanent member of the UN Security Council in 1971. States are constantly (re)constructing themselves. Ideology and geopolitics, which are of course intersubjective, can play a key role in this process.

7. Sino-African Relations: 1980-1999

From 1980-1999 China essentially reinvented itself. It focused on developing its economy, providing modest aid to Africa and investing even less. This period could be characterized as one of strategic retreat in the pursuit of a China-first policy, which was articulated by Premier Zhao Ziyang on a tour of Africa in 1982-1983: "China is now adjusting its economy and it has its own difficulties. We must not be forced to do what is beyond our mutual strength...It is necessary to go for active exploration, accumulate experiences and advance steadily. We should pay attention to efficiency, quality, and economic results, and must ensure that they bring benefits to our friends and help ourselves forward as well" (Xu 2001). The statement encapsulates elite (re) construction of yet another China. China here is beginning to speak the idiom of neoliberalism in its international relations, even while pursuing economic policy at home that is more in line with developmental statism (state-managed economic change). While China continued its policy of establishing diplomatic ties with as many African countries as possible throughout the 1980s and 1990s, (provided they ended such ties with Taiwan), so-called prestige projects (stadiums, convention centers, concert halls, university buildings, etc.) were the prices China was prepared to pay for this strategy, not the infrastructure projects of the 1960s and 1970s or the promises of billions of dollars in aid and investment of the 2000s. In fact, after the TAZARA China would not undertake another major railway project in Africa until the second decade of the 21st century. Economic ties between China and Africa remained modest during this time. In 1990, for example, Sino-African merchandise trade stood at 2 billion USD, much of which consisted of commodity exports (e.g. oil and other minerals) from Africa to China, resulting in a positive balance of trade in favor of Africa. China was focusing on growing its economy through the 'three modernizations' identified by Deng Xiaoping—i.e., agriculture, industry, science and technology. Toward this end, it was an importer of capital, disinclined to export this scarce factor input to Africa. This posture would change as China accumulated the world's largest foreign-exchange reserves or liquid capital. Flushed with cash, bank deposits, bonds, and other foreign-currency denominated financial assets in the new millennium, yet in need of raw materials and new markets for its state-owned enterprises, not to mention international influence commensurate with its success, China would employ its newfound wealth in its Africa policy.

There is one flaw in the analysis thus far: African agency in Sino-African relations is not acknowledged. The lacuna is remedied here at once. Africa spent the 1980s and early 1990s firmly in the grip of neoliberalism. It was not unknown to Africans that China was experiencing impressive growth rates during this period, using the very anti-neoliberal (i.e., statist) methods the West had deemed anathema to economic development on the continent. The West eventually came to suffer a credibility problem in Africa, which made the Chinese model of development worthy of some consideration. Just as importantly, China's success would provide it with the financial wherewithal to meaningfully (re)engage Africa. The failure of neoliberalism in the 1980s to revive Africa's economies was one of the factors that triggered the fall of authoritarian regimes in Africa in 1990, ushering in political reform (Anonymous 1998). The overtly liberal democratic régimes that replaced authoritarianism needed new bases in which to anchor their legitimacy, which inevitably meant a return to the types of infrastructure projects of the 1960s and 1970s and an emphasis on FDI that could, respectively, capture the popular imagination and create jobs. As the Soviet Union was no more and U.S. strategic interest in Africa waned, financing in the quantity needed by African countries was most likely to come from China.

In sum, where the African ‘renaissance’ was concerned, China was the most viable godfather. It is in this nexus of African reengagement with economic growth and democratization and China’s ‘going global’ strategy that Sino-African relations in the 21st century can best be understood, not the comforting, but false, moral equivalence of ‘second scrambling,’ which treats African countries as spectators in their own drama. Finally, in 1989 China experienced the Tiananmen Square protests. While much of the West pilloried China for its handling of the protesters, Africa stood by it, which Africa did not have to do. In fact, it would have been easier for Africa to join the cauldron of Western critics. This defiant stance endeared Africa to Chinese rulers. Contrarian behavior is the essence of agency. Sino-African relations are not bereft of African agency, in spite of obvious asymmetries between China and Africa limiting the extent of African agency (Phillips 2018).

8. Sino-African Relations: 2000-Present

The year 2000 witnessed the intensification of Sino-African relations through the creation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in October. Whereas before, Sino-African relations were conducted at the highest levels by presidential visits to and from China, which were by definition rare, FOCAC would increase the frequency of Sino-African interaction. This deepening coincided not only with China’s impressive economic performance in the previous two decades, but also Chinese effort to integrate the capitalist world economy. China joined the World Trade Organization on December 11, 2001, signaling acceptance of the rules and practices of neoliberalism. Held every three years in alternating venues in Africa and China, the FOCAC meetings would make Sino-African relations more of a Pan-African affair as it allowed China to deal with African states as a group, facilitating the emergence of an Africa policy by China. Former Chinese president Jiang Zemin, former premier Zhu Rongji, vice-president Hu Jintao, and representatives from 44 African countries, including four heads of state, were present at the first ministerial conference of the FOCAC. The FOCAC Summit (close but not identical to the FOCAC ministerial conference) was another avenue for the expression of Sino-African relations. The first one was held in Beijing in 2006, at which former Chinese president Hu Jintao announced the creation of another institution emblematic of the deepening of Sino-African ties: the China-Africa Development Fund (or CAD Fund) with an initial contribution from China of 1 billion USD. The CAD Fund is financed by China Development Bank, which raises capital to finance large infrastructure projects in China and overseas. The CAD Fund aims to increase FDI in Africa by Chinese companies in key strategic industries, such as transportation, energy, and mining. Forty-nine African countries attended the fourth ministerial conference of the FOCAC in Egypt in 2009, when China doubled the CAD Fund to 10 billion USD. The same year China became Africa’s largest trading partner, with commercial exchange rising from 10.6 billion USD in 2000 to 91.06 billion (SAIIA 2015). But does this amount to a second colonialism by China? What do the empirical evidence concerning economic exchange between China and Africa actually suggest? The reader should keep in mind that European colonialism in Africa was never strictly about economic exploitation; rather, it was a social project that encompassed not only the subjugation of Africa’s natural resources to Europe’s industrial needs, but also issues of territorial expansion, political control, racism, language and religion—in sum, cultural domination. Still, economic data can be used as building blocks for a different construction of Sino-African relations. The approach is also in line with the argument that constructivism does not gainsay the empirical method.

China is an important economic partner for Africa, but Africa is not necessarily the key economic partner for China. Table 1 shows the distribution of China’s foreign direct investment in different regions of the world. Africa’s share of China’s total FDI flows in 2015 was only 2 percent. Asia was, by far, the favorite destination for Chinese FDI, receiving almost 75 percent of total Chinese FDI and highlighting the importance of proximity and other factors.

Table 1: Regional Distribution of China’s FDI, 2015

Continent	(bn\$)	(%)
Asia	108.37	74.4
Europe	7.12	4.9
Latin America	12.61	8.6
North America	10.72	7.4
Oceania	3.87	2.7
Africa	2.98	2.0
Total	145.67	100.0

Source: <http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01&zb=A06050202&sj=2015>

Table 2 shows that five industries made up 82.3 percent of total Chinese FDI stock in Africa in 2015. They were, respectively: mining (27.5 percent), construction (27.4 percent), manufacturing (13.3 percent), financial services (9.9 percent), and scientific research and technical services (4.2 percent). In spite of Africa's reputation for mineral possession, the mining sector was marginally more attractive to Chinese FDI in Europe in 2015 than in Africa, respectively accounting for 28.9 and 27.5 percent of total Chinese FDI. If China were "scrambling" in Africa, investment in extractive activities, such as mining, would be expected to be in greater display than indicated by the data. According to Table 2, China invests virtually as much in construction in Africa as it does in mining. This reflects the need of African countries for capital to develop infrastructure and, almost certainly, the impact of Chinese government policies that enhance the competitiveness of Chinese firms bidding for contracts overseas.

Table 2: China's Outward FDI Stock by Region and Industry in 2015

Continent	Industry	Stock (bn\$)	Percent
Asia	Leasing and Business Services	331.31	43.1
	Financial Services	103.09	13.4
	Wholesale and Retail Trade	100.43	13.1
	Mining	71.46	9.3
	Manufacturing	40.71	5.3
	Subtotal	647.00	84.2
Africa	Mining	9.54	27.5
	Construction	9.51	27.4
	Manufacturing	4.63	13.3
	Financial Services	3.42	9.9
	Scientific Research & Technical Services	1.46	4.2
	Subtotal	28.56	82.3
Europe	Mining	24.18	28.9
	Manufacturing	16.08	19.2
	Financial Services	15.34	18.3
	Leasing and Business Services	8.00	9.6
	Wholesale and Retail Trade	5.86	7.0
	Subtotal	69.46	83.0
L. America	Leasing and Business Services	60.25	47.7
	Financial Services	23.07	18.3
	Mining	12.15	9.6
	Wholesale and Retail Trade	9.62	7.6
	Transportation, Storage and Postal Services	4.55	3.6
	Subtotal	109.64	86.8
N. America	Manufacturing	12.19	23.4
	Financial Services	12.17	23.3
	Leasing and Business Services	6.57	12.6
	Mining	6.48	12.4
	Real Estate	3.76	7.2
	Subtotal	41.17	78.9
Oceania	Mining	18.57	57.9
	Real Estate	2.99	9.3

Financial Services	2.56	8.0
Leasing and Business Services	2.34	7.3
Manufacturing	1.33	4.1
Subtotal	27.79	86.6

Source: <http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01&zb=A06050202&sj=2015>

Table 3 shows Chinese FDI flows and stock in Africa from 2007-2015, as well as presenting data on trade. (We were unable to find data before 2007, although we wanted to go as far back as 2000.)

Table 3: China's FDI (flows and stock) and trade with Africa (in mm \$)

Year	Flows	Stock	China Export	China Import
2007	1,574.304,461.8337,297.73		36,359.20	
2008	5,490.557,803.83	51,239.92	55,966.94	
2009	1,438.879,332.27	47,734.56	43,331.24	
2010	2,111.9913,042.12	59,954.05	67,091.96	
2011	3,173.1416,244.32	73,083.03	93,239.87	
2012	2,516.6621,729.71	85,310.61	113,250.64	
2013	3,370.6426,185.77	92,799.37	117,454.72	
2014	3,201.9332,350.06	106,034.75	115,631.38	
2015	2,977.9234,694.40	108,540.50	70,258.27	

Source: <http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01&zb=A06050202&sj=2015>

Table 3 shows variations in Chinese FDI flows into Africa during the period while FDI stock steadily rose, signaling the increasing importance of China's economic presence in the region. Trade data between China and Africa are equally revealing of intensifying economic relations. In 2007, Chinese exports to Africa were 37 billion USD, by 2015 they were 109 billion USD, a nearly 300 percent increase. Chinese imports from Africa increased from 36 billion USD in 2007 to 70 billion USD in 2015. Chinese imports from Africa reached an all-time high of 117 billion USD in 2013, reflecting the upsurge in commodity prices during the period. Still, Africa accounted for just 8.4 percent of total Chinese exports in 2015. Asia-Pacific countries, the European Union, and North America, were, respectively, the top destinations for Chinese goods. Table 3 also shows that, with the exception of 2009 and 2015, China imported more from Africa than it exported. Thus, Africa generally maintained a favorable trade balance with China. The balance of trade between Africa and the colonizing powers probably went the other way during much of the colonial period. In sum, the data from Table 3 problematize the appropriateness of "new scramble" to describe Sino-African economic relations, although exceptionally high commodity prices and the brevity of the time period militate against definitive conclusions.

To further the study of contemporary Sino-African economic relations, a country-study approach was adopted, in addition to a continent-wide focus. Five countries were used for the purpose: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ethiopia, Nigeria, South Africa, and Zambia. These countries were chosen for several reasons. First, they have large internal markets. Second, they are among the richest countries in Africa, in terms of natural resources. Third, they include the two biggest economies in Africa. Fourth, they are China's most important economic partners in Africa, attracting 26 percent of Chinese FDI 2015. If China is "scrambling" in Africa, these countries would be expected to attract a significant share of China's FDI on the continent. Table 4 shows Chinese FDI and projects in the five countries from 2000-2015.

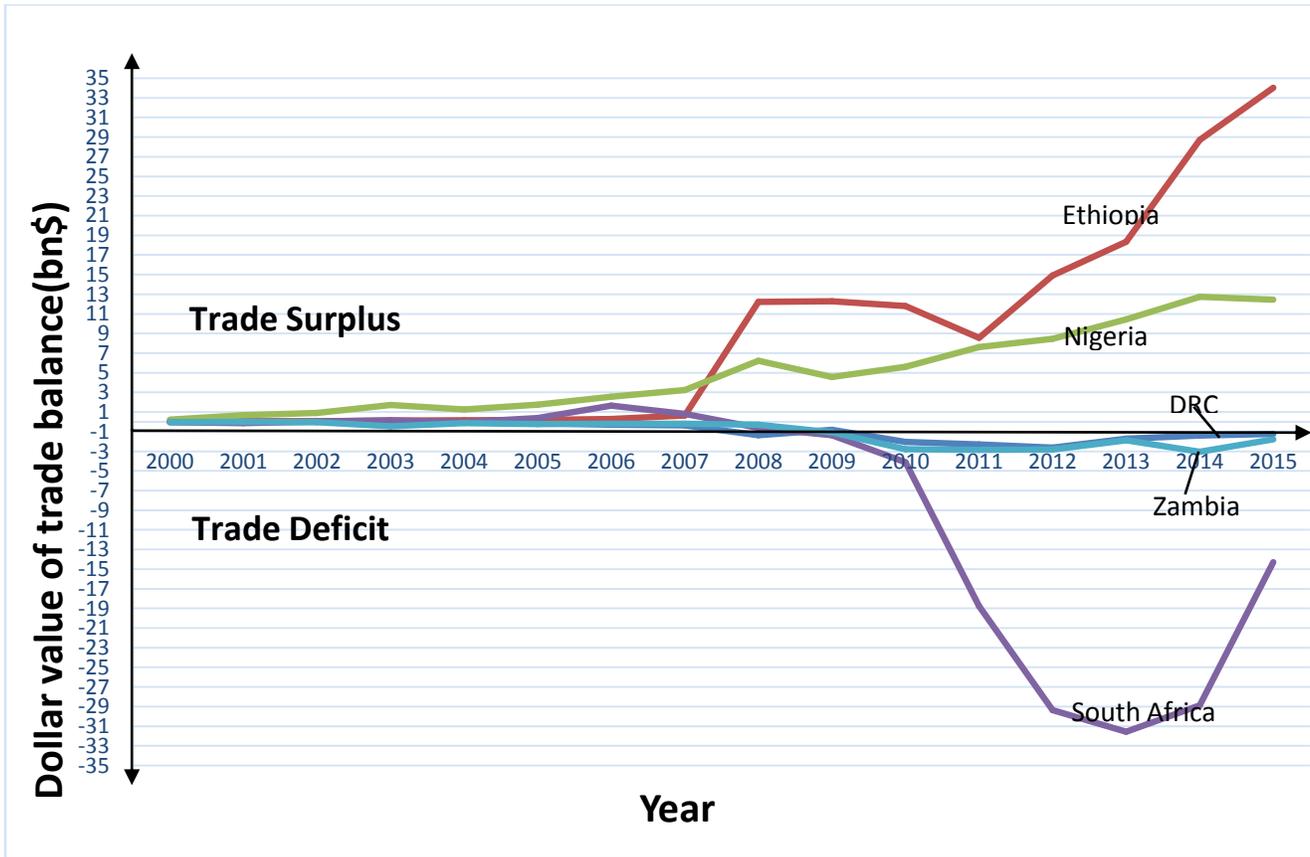
Table 4: China's FDI and Projects in Five African Countries: 2000-15

Year	DRC		Ethiopia		Nigeria		South Africa		Zambia	
	FDI (mn\$)	Projects (mn\$)	FDI (mn\$)	Projects (bn\$)	FDI (mn\$)	Projects (bn\$)	FDI (mn\$)	Projects (mn\$)	FDI (mn\$)	Projects (mn\$)
2000		2		0.05		0.06		6.49		37
2001		10		0.08		0.11		9.17		55
2002		4		0.16		0.14		3.61		32
2003	6	23	0.98	0.18	24.4	0.26	8.86	16.31	5.53	24
2004	11.91	20	0.43	0.20	45.52	0.49	17.81	22.89	2.23	106
2005	5.07	83	4.93	0.18	53.3	0.77	47.74	79.60	10.09	33
2006	36.73	163	23.95	0.32	67.79	1.10	40.74	119.72	87.44	149
2007	57.27	192	13.28	0.59	390.35	1.38	454.4	173.87	119.34	228
2008	23.99	280	9.71	0.98	162.56	1.61	4807.9	247.31	213.97	218
2009	227.16	630	74.29	1.19	171.86	2.00	41.6	118.18	111.80	354
2010	236.19	628	58.53	1.54	184.89	2.92	411.2	336.90	75.05	404
2011	75.18	784	72.3	1.80	197.43	3.45	-14.2	445.94	291.78	748
2012	344.17	969	121.56	2.29	333.06	4.99	-814.9	695.38	291.55	1,230
2013	121.27	940	102.46	3.55	209.14	4.27	-89.2	395.44	292.86	2,490
2014	157.56	1440	119.59	6.83	199.78	4.53	42.1	399.80	424.85	2,030
2015	213.71	N/A	175.29	5.89	50.59	3.48	233.2	451.77	96.55	1,790

Source: <http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01&zb=A06050202&sj=2015>

Table 4 shows there are substantial variations in FDI across and within the five countries from year to year. In none of the countries, except South Africa, does Chinese FDI reach 1 billion USD during any of the years of the period. This shows a lack of interest by China in owning productive assets in Africa. Just as importantly, it suggests that Chinese FDI in Africa is undertaken by small, privately-owned firms—hence the modest FDI amounts—not the huge state-owned enterprises that would just justify the discourse of new imperialism. A better indicator of China's economic engagement in Africa is the large amount in dollar value of contracted projects, which admittedly include some parts of FDI, trade, and loans financing the projects. Table 4 shows that the nominal value of projects in each country is much bigger than corresponding Chinese FDI. In 2015, for example, Ethiopia attracted \$5.89 billion worth of projects but only \$175 million in FDI; Nigeria attracted \$3.48 billion in projects but only \$50 million in FDI. The data confirm Chinese preference for infrastructure projects, which could be harbingers to increased FDI in the future but, for now, probably reflect a policy of helping Chinese firms win construction bids overseas. The preponderance of projects in the Chinese portfolio also reflects the natural-resources-for-infrastructure barter system in Sino-African economic relations. Figure 1 shows trade trajectories between China and the five countries.

Figure 1: China's trade balance with five African countries: 2000-2015



Source: <http://data.stats.gov.cn/easyquery.htm?cn=C01&zb=A06050202&sj=2015>

According to Figure 1, two countries (Ethiopia and Nigeria) had trade surpluses with China from 2007-2015, two had trade deficits (Zambia and South Africa) from 2009-2015, and one (DRC) essentially had balanced trade ($Im=Ex$) from 2000-2015. In 2015, the top five export products from Ethiopia to China were agriculture, fur, shoes, minerals, and coffee. The top five imports from China were (1) electrical equipment, (2) machines and components, (3) non-woven clothing, (4) vehicles, and (5) iron and steel. Similar patterns could be noted for the remaining countries, confirming Africa as a primary commodity producer. Sino-African economic relations are influenced by well-established structural conditions in the world economy and Chinese elite *reading* of these conditions, once again, precisely what constructivism expounds.

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Defying fixed and easy caricatures, Sino-African relations are an excellent study in foreign policy as a dynamic social construction. Since the 1950s, China's foreign policy has undergone momentous change, depending on the Chinese elite's idea of China's role in the world, its capability and interest, none of which has remained unchanged. Sino-African relations had little economic content in the 1950s; Chinese capital increased in Africa from 1960-1979, but that involvement had more to do with geopolitics and ideology than profit-making—in fact, it was highly concentrated in one project (TAZARA); China retreated somewhat from Africa from 1980-1999. It reengaged the continent at the turn of the 21st century to become one of its leading economic partners. So could the last period, at least, be deemed a “second scramble?” The empirical evidence, as presented above, do not support this interpretation. In no way are we suggesting that China's presence in Africa is selfless. Zhou Enlai did not make this claim, even at the height of revolutionary fervor in China and rhetorical solidarity with the Third World in the 1960s. It is an open secret that Africa is one of the world's richest continents in terms of natural resources, with new mineral discoveries being made in hitherto unsuspecting places seemingly every day. The annual rent derived from these resources is in the order of 5 percent of global GDP, compared to 1 percent in the early 1970s (Piketty 2014).

It would be surprising if China paid no attention to Africa, in light of China's needs and Africa's endowments. To borrow the lecherous expression of King Leopold, which major economy would ignore this succulent cake? So (neo)liberalism's emphasis on win-win would seem to crumble in the face of reality, as much as Marxism and realism.

Going forward, how should Sino-African relations be recast, so they reflect neither the cynicism and false moral equivalence of a second colonialism nor the blind optimism (even naiveté) of neoliberalism, including Sino-neoliberalism? To raise this question is to underscore the profound contradictions of Sino-African relations in the 21st century, but it is in the interstice of those contradictions that a much scrutinized but misunderstood association can perhaps best be constructed. There is a connection between contemporary Sino-African relations, European colonialism in the late 19th century and even the trans-Atlantic slave trade before. These events are variants of the enmeshment, first, of empires and then nation-states into regional and global processes, which stem from technological, economic, political, and even ecological change. However, unlike the late 19th century, globalization in the 21st century is taking place in a context of national self-determination anchored in international law and norms radically different from those that prevailed during the so-called *belle époque* of late imperialism (1850-1914). Information is also more readily accessible than ever before. In the shadow of a new "logic of appropriateness" overtly predatory behavior that may have been acceptable yesterday is likely to be abhorrent now. Sovereign African states face no overt restrictions on what they produce and with whom to trade. Britain imposed quotas on cotton production in colonies as far-flung as India and Sudan. Colbertism was the guiding principle of France in its possessions. Today, the World Trade Organization would look askance at these policies. To equate contemporary Sino-African relations to the renewal of colonialism is to gloss over a century of change in the architecture of international relations and denies the role of African agency in interacting with the rest of the world. African state elites have a degree of freedom unavailable to their predecessors of the late 19th century, not least for the following reasons. Traditional imperial powers no longer monopolize African space, as new actors (Turkey, India) enter the fray. Even inside the most overtly centralized nation-states, competing power centers often emerge. Chinese construction firms compete fiercely for international contracts, allowing astute African negotiators (e.g., Ethiopians) to strike deals that would have been impossible with the monopolistic royal charter and concession companies of lore. By the same token, to view Sino-African relations in the light of liberalism and, worse yet, as the answer to Africa's development challenges, is to be cockeyed to the way nation-states, including China, have achieved prosperity (i.e., through selective participation in globalization). Economic exchange continues to be rooted in structures of inequality and exploitation, but changes in the rules of appropriateness, which is to say in morality and ethics, mean that these conditions are continually challenged by agents, who are more informed and interconnected than ever before. China's relations with Africa are globalist-nationalist in their contours, but, because of China's closed political system, state agents dominate expressions of these values. Africa's relations with China are similarly delineated, but suffused with liberal democracy and frustrated development, which encourage more complex, multi-layered, and citizen-centric forms of political participation. Criticisms of China from ordinary citizens in Africa stem from social exclusion by régimes that have undergone democratization since 1990 and might be expected to be more inclusive and transparent in their dealings. Thus constructed as neither neocolonial nor selfless nor inherently positive-sum, but profoundly agential and interpretive, Sino-African relations must be considered normal for the age. This favors hybrid social theories, such as constructivism, over stylized, Procrustean ones (Marxism, realism, liberalism and their variants).

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