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China and Africa: The Crucial Urban Connection

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By [Xiangming Chen](#) & [Garth Myers](#)

The relations between China and Africa have become increasingly complex over the last four decades. As China's economic ties with Africa go beyond commodity-dominant trade, Xiangming Chen & Garth Myers consider China's activities in Africa's broader economy with a focus on urban infrastructure.

Back in the early 1970s, the Chinese Dining Hall of Xinqiao Hotel in Beijing where Xiangming Chen worked as a waiter was a favorable spot for Tanzanian and Zambian engineering students to drink beer. They were in Beijing to learn how to operate the railroad between the two countries that China began to build in 1970 and completed in 1975. Despite being very poor, China put up \$500 million to build the Tanzania-Zambia Railway, the largest single foreign-aid project undertaken by China at the time. The irony then was that a good number of these African students were known to be the sons of government officials with whom China shared a strong socialist ideology.

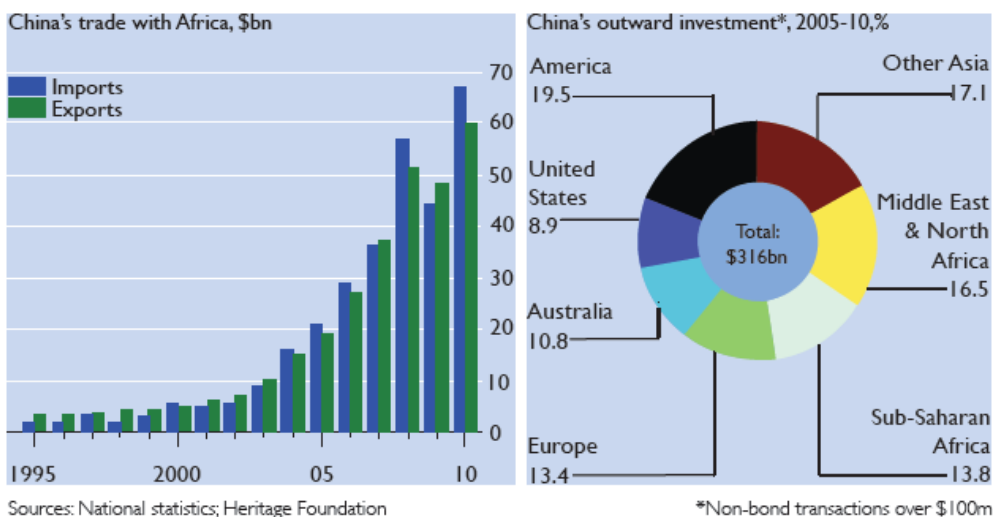
If we fast forward to the 21st century, we see that while China and Africa remain connected, their relations have become considerably different and much more complex than four decades ago. The new China-Africa relationship is defined by the rapid growth and broader scale of their economic ties. While negligible two decades ago, China-Africa trade reached \$200 billion in 2012, a historical high (see Figure 1 on the next page), which makes China Africa's largest trading partner today. With only limited investment in Africa before the 2000s, China's cumulative investment in Africa reached \$21 billion in 2012, with over 2,000 Chinese companies

operating across the continent. Of China's various forms of foreign aid that rose from \$1.8 billion in 2001 to over \$20 billion a year today,¹ a huge chunk went to Africa. African investment in China rose from \$280 million in 2002 to \$1.31 billion in 2009. There is a growing community of over 100,000 African traders and merchants working and living in a sort of ethnic enclave in the southern Chinese metropolis of Guangzhou² (Canton)—a historical trading enclave in and gateway to China after 1760.

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Given these aggregate trade and investment figures, China and Africa may appear to have a good two-way relationship. Yet most people see it as lopsided, given China's massive economic footprint and influence throughout Africa across its energy, commodity, manufacturing, and infrastructure sectors. One commentator calls ‘the rise of China in Africa arguably the most important development for the continent since the end of the Cold War’.³ The renowned singer Bono, who has focused most of his global activist and charity work on AIDS in Africa, recently characterised China's expansion in Africa as one of the most important geopolitical faux pas of the 21st century that the United States and Europe should confront.⁴ A hyperbole or not, Bono's comment sheds a bright spotlight on the global long-term significance of China in Africa.

Figure 1: China In Africa



Looming Long and Large in Africa

The famous Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden (1907-1973) wrote about China and Africa coming together. Little did he know that the Chinese have been coming to Africa for over 500 years. In the early 1400s, the legendary explorer Zheng He commanded a fleet that went as far as the east coast of Africa. To prove this record, Chinese and Kenyan archeologists have been searching the African coast for the fabled wreck of a junk, and have recently identified several shipwrecks of interest off the Kenyan coast. During the late 1800s, the Chinese went to South Africa to mine minerals mostly as indentured workers. The Tanzania-Zambia Railway in the 1970s typified Maoist China's development aid to ideologically left regimes in Africa, while China's African engagement during the 'reform and opening up' era has been more economically pragmatic.

“The number of Chinese living in Africa has grown from a few thousand a decade ago to between one and two million, mostly businesspeople, across the continent today.”

Relative to any of the previous eras, China has significantly speeded and scaled up its ties with and presence in Africa. China's trade with Africa soared 700% from 2000-2010, way ahead of trade of India, the European Union, and the United States with Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 14% of China's outbound investment during 2005-2010 (see Figure 1). The number of Chinese living in Africa has grown from a few thousand a decade ago to between one and two million, mostly businesspeople, across the continent today. They drill in the oil fields of Angola, Niger, and Sudan, mine in the copper belt of Zambia, sell small merchandise in the Chinatown of Johannesburg and at the central market in Nairobi, build new gated communities in Lusaka, completed the Bui Dam in Ghana, and continue the joint agri-business projects in Mali and Sierra Leone which started in the 1980s.⁵

Some might see China's extensive footprint in Africa as a scramble for its badly needed energy and natural resources, much like some of China's deals in Latin America, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia.⁶ This is largely true given Africa's heavy dependency on commodity exports and the content of China-Africa trade. Of the 45 Sub-Saharan African countries, commodities account for at least one quarter of total exports in 20 countries including the three largest economies of Angola, Nigeria, and South Africa. Almost 80% of China's imports from Africa are mineral products, while machinery made up 29% of China's exports to Africa (see Figure 2 on next page). China's huge demand for African commodities helped Africa's GDP grow 5.5% annually over the last decade, although this growth is slowing as China's own economic growth has cooled off. As China's economic ties with Africa go beyond commodity-dominant trade, we focus on China's activities in Africa's broader economy with a focus on the urban infrastructure, which has not drawn nearly as much global attention.

China's Urban Impact in Africa

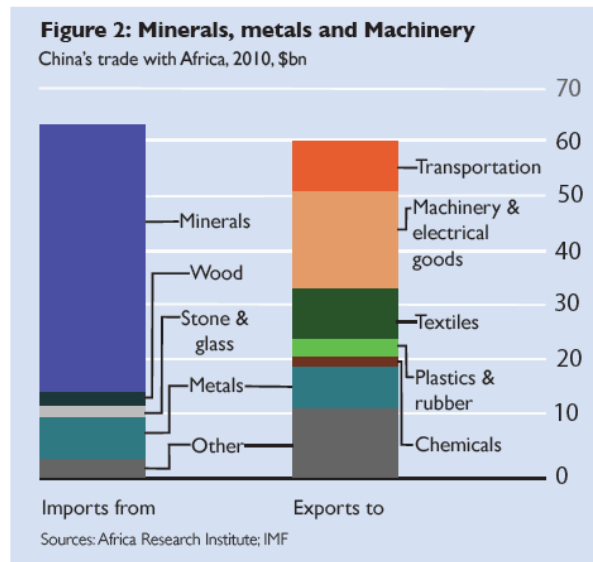
China's impacts and interactions at Africa's urban scale are transforming its forms and fabrics. Sub-Saharan Africa is the least urbanised and most rapidly urbanising world region at the same time, and rates of urbanisation have not followed conventional Western models, where urbanisation is driven by industrialisation. One major spatial consequence of the trend of demographic growth without corresponding economic growth is that the substantial physical expansion of the urban footprint, typically on the peri-urban edges of cities occurs in a manner dominated by informality, devoid of substantial formal planning.

The phenomenon of peri-urban informality connects with the China-Africa narrative in two ways. First, the increasing Chinese residency in cities in Africa is tangible in the built environment, housing markets, and urban culture, and the changes resonate outward to the peri-urban areas of the continent. In Dakar, the main zone of Chinese settlement is a generally middle-class area around the Boulevard de Centenaire built in the 1950s and 'meant to resemble Avenue des Champs Elysées', according to Kouoh.⁷ In Nairobi, it is a similarly middle class zone west of downtown – a formerly white-only segment of the colonial map.

“Chinese settlers reside all over the middle- and upper-class zones of Lusaka, whilst the most symbolic presence comes in the Chinese dominance of Lusaka's Millennium Village, a gated corporate business park originally built to house the Presidents of the African Union for their 2000 Summit.”

While both in Dakar and Nairobi large highway projects are meeting long-recognised transportation infrastructure needs, the routes directly disadvantage peri-urban Pikine and Kibera residents. Kibera – already bisected by the swirling Kenya Railways – has been further sliced in half by the Chinese-built Southern Bypass Highway. This highway's purpose is 'to

connect from Karen [among Nairobi’s richest suburbs] all the way to the airport and then to Thika Road, but they just go and do it, there is no engagement with the community. This bypass cuts through the forest, through plots, and we have no discussion of participation’.⁸



The speculative residential construction at the economic high end led by this Chinese investment drives up the price of urban real estate further beyond the reach of ordinary residents, driving more people to places like Pikine or Kibera, where informal construction then further displaces people. Pikine’s severe floods led to a strong presence in the built environment of abandoned houses; combined with the rising costs of remaining housing, community leaders see the rise of both severe overcrowding (30 to 40 people in one house) and out-migration of Pikinois to rural areas. The Chinese-built superhighway to Thika, just northeast of Nairobi, fueled a land rush in the fertile coffee lands of Kiambu County.

Exhibit 1



Source: Garth Myers, June 2012; additional photos of this development project are available on <http://henanguojizambia.com/silverestgardens.php>.

Chinese settlers reside all over the middle- and upper-class zones of Lusaka, but perhaps the most dramatically symbolic presence comes in the Chinese dominance of Lusaka's Millennium Village, a gated corporate business park originally built to house the Presidents of the African Union for their 2000 Summit. The Village's Henan-Guoji Development Company is developing Silverest Gardens (see Exhibit 1) 10 kilometers beyond the Lusaka airport, promising a 'rationally planned and comfortable living environment' for those who can afford houses that cost in the neighborhood of \$200,000. Silverest Gardens claims to be the 'community changing the city', but it provides no housing for any of the service workers for its 380 homes, indirectly leading to the creation of a new peri-urban informal settlement for them, cut off from the city, since its residents will have to provide for themselves in every sense.

In Lusaka, China-built middle- and upper-class housing estates are steadily displacing longstanding peri-urban informal settlements – occasionally with violence, as in June 2013's forced removal of Kampasa settlement near the Lusaka airport. Kampasa long housed informal workers for the Zambia National Service camp and the local, white-owned peri-urban agribusiness giant, Galounia Farm, but when these two owners sold adjoining parcels to a Chinese firm, the military rolled in with no warning and displaced the residents, shooting and killing several in the process.⁹

Is China Good for Africa?

This is not an easy question to which there is a clear-cut yes-no answer. There are two comparative ways to assess the balance of evidence bearing on this question. Relative to its early years of providing official foreign aid to Africa almost half a century ago, China now has a much more diversified presence and influence in Africa through both government and private channels, or their combination. In helping Africa set up special economic zones, China has transplanted its relatively successful developmental strategy with market-based decisions and investment by its private companies in these zones.¹⁰ Retaining an old focus on infrastructure,

China has scaled it up by rehabilitating the 840-mile Benguela railway line that now connects Angola's Atlantic coast with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia. This kind of large-scale infrastructure, which would not have been built without China, has won it some praises.

“China now has a much more diversified presence and influence in Africa through both government and private channels, or their combination.”

Unlike the old European colonialists and the more recent Western aid programs, China has claimed not to intervene in the domestic political affairs of African countries but tried to focus on economic cooperation. In fact, an editorial in China's official newspaper *The People's Daily* (on August 20, 2013) advocated the coming together of 'The Chinese Dream' and 'The African Dream' through mutually beneficial trade and investment to alleviate poverty and achieve sustainable development. The reality in Africa however is quite different. The Chad government has recently shut down oil operations by China after discovering that they had dumped excess oil in ditches and asked local workers to remove it without protection.¹¹ This clearly contradicts China's official rhetoric regarding its intention to do good in Africa. By proclaiming political non-interference, China ends up giving some pretext and legitimacy to the authoritarian governments in Africa to continue governing as they wish.

There is a danger in praising Chinese investments in Africa without noting the human rights costs of China's strictly business mindset in Africa. Zambia makes a fascinating case study for this. While Zambian economist Dambisa Moyo¹² finds claims of labor abuse by Chinese firms in her native Zambia 'worth investigating', she contends that 'the evidence is... sketchy' for these claims, citing, as a counter-weight, a 2007 Pew survey of public opinions in some African countries suggesting a more favorable view toward the Chinese than toward Western aid donors. Nearly a decade of research in Zambia runs against Moyo's argument though. More than a half-dozen other researchers have documented the highly negative outcomes of Chinese investments there. These can be seen in low wages, poor working conditions, horrible health and safety conditions, exacerbating inequalities, importation of low-skilled workers and a failure to build backward and forward linkages in Zambia's economic interest.¹³ Zambia's macro-economic indicators have improved in the last decade, but its micro-economic and social development indicators have barely budged. China's role in African economic development, though based on a different calculation of what constitutes aid, is starting to have many of the flaws that scholars like Moyo want to attach to Western aid programs alone.

“As African countries and leaders become more alert in their dealings with China, African citizens can play an important role in holding their leaders to be more accountable in critically examining the deals with Beijing. There can be a win-win situation for the China-Africa relationship.”

The China-Africa nexus is as complex as it has been described in the news media and analysed by informed scholars. It has a very long way to go in playing out fully for the world to see. There are many double sides to this evolving development. Having brought much needed new investment to Africa, China has not created as many jobs for locals as expected, although factories in a special economic zone in Zambia employed only one Chinese for every four local workers, for example.¹⁴ China's reluctance to hire more local African workers can be attributed to its avoiding training and management costs including the language barrier. While China has built extensive urban infrastructure in and between African cities, its quality is not as good as it should be. Continuing to work with the Zimbabwean government of President Robert Mugabe, China has also developed relations with its opposition. China provides aid and investment to both democratic and non-democratic regimes alike. Despite Africa's dependence on China for

exporting its rich commodities, less demand from China due its slower economic growth can open up new opportunities for African countries to pursue alternative and more sustainable development strategies. In one such example, the China-Africa Overseas Leather Products tannery, located just outside Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, has hired 450 workers at \$37-\$53 a month, which are much lower rates than in China and most other parts of Asia. But it takes more than 40 days to bring soaking chemicals from China to the factory due to poor and highly inefficient transport infrastructure.¹⁵ It circles back to China's heavy investment in urban infrastructure in Africa as a necessary condition for supporting labor-intensive manufacturing that can sustain economic growth in the long run.



Given its already strong foothold in Africa and its economic capacity, China will be better off maintaining its pragmatic and no-strings-attached approach in managing its relations with Africa. In dealing with the economic giant, African leaders will need to step up in protecting their countries' interests as Malawi, Tanzania, and Uganda have set new restrictions on the industries and areas for Chinese operation. Botswana's president, Ian Khama, recently said that 'we are going to be looking very carefully at any company that originates from China in providing construction services'.¹⁶ As African countries and leaders become more alert in their dealings with China, African citizens can play an important role in holding their leaders to be more accountable in critically examining the deals with Beijing.¹⁷ There can be a win-win situation for the increasingly close China-Africa relationship. The whole world is waiting to see it unfold in the 21st century.

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