Dancing with the Dragon
Africa’s Courtship with China¹

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the deepening economic relationship between Africa and China as manifested in the explosive growth in trade and investment. Celebrated by some and condemned by others, it is a relationship that cannot be ignored and is of great interest to African and Chinese policy makers and peoples. It has raised concerns in Western capitals and the media and is the subject of a rapidly expanding literature. The paper explores the three dominant ways in which the relationship tends to be framed: in terms of imperialism, globalization, and solidarity and argues that we need to develop a more historically informed approach that transcends these perspectives and recognizes the complexities, contradictions and changing dynamics of Africa’s age-old engagements with China. The paper argues that like all major powers, China seeks to promote its own interests in dealings with African countries; hence the responsibility to make the relationship beneficial for Africa lies with African governments and civil societies working in concert also to protect their own interests.

Africa’s courtship with China, a captivating dance between the elephant and the dragon, has intriguing implications for all concerned and the world at large. It is marked by, on the one hand, the grand political theatre of elaborate presidential tours and lavish summits, with their lofty declarations of equal partnership between the distant peoples of these two ancient lands, by all those dramatic and diplomatic displays of statehood beloved of postcolonial or postrevolutionary societies enchanted by their sovereignty. On the other, it is driven by the explosive growth of economic exchanges, from thriving trade to increasing investment to mounting migrations, by the pursuit of the tantalizing promises of development embodied in the dreams of nationhood in the world’s most populous country and its poorest continent. Choreographed by

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such powerful political and economic imperatives, it is a dance that arouses great interest in the media, among curious academics, cynical politicians, and concerned civil society activists. The commentaries swing unsteadily from the excited to the anxious, the celebratory to the condemnatory, and the sanguine to the suspicious.2

The courtship has intensified since 2000. In that year the first ministerial conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (or FOCAC) was held in Beijing in October. It was attended by the Chinese President and Premier and four African Presidents and the Secretary-General of the Organization of Africa Unity (OAU), as well as more than 80 ministers from China and 44 African countries, representatives from 17 regional and international organizations, and business people from Africa and China. The second ministerial conference was held in Addis Ababa in December 2003, and attended by the Chinese Premier, six African presidents and three prime ministers, the heads of the African Union and the United Nations, and more than 70 ministers from China and African countries (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation).

In November 2006 came the glittering Beijing Summit and Third Ministerial Conference of FOCAC, which was attended by the leaders of 48 African countries, from Egypt to South Africa. China staged a dazzling performance, its biggest diplomatic party ever to celebrate its “new strategic partnership” with Africa. The sights, sounds, and even culinary smells of Africa were everywhere; the spruced up streets of Beijing were emblazoned with the stereotypical Africa of elephants, zebras, and giraffes, the mysterious Africa of “Myth and Miracle” according to the official slogan, a land that was finally open for engagement with the dragon flexing its global economic muscles, with the insatiable new factory of the world (Beijing Summit and Third Ministerial Conference of FOCAC).

Besides these grand multilateral summits, bilateral visits between Chinese and African leaders have become commonplace; Chinese President Hu Jintao has visited Africa three times since taking office in 2003. Two-way visits at ministerial level have become routine. In fact, since 1991, China’s foreign minister has made visits to African nations the first official stop abroad (Anshan 80). Also, the exchanges have not been confined to pageantry-loving politicians. Business people and economic agencies have joined in this astonishing spectacle of economic cooperation. And trade, investment, and migration between the continent and subcontinent have exploded.

This paper seeks to explore the obviously complex, often contradictory, and clearly changing dynamics of Africa’s relationship with China. It begins by outlining the rapid growth in trade relations between the two and critiquing the emerging alarmist discourses in western circles. This is followed by an attempt to put relations between Africa and China in a historical context and interrogate African and Chinese discourses. I conclude by examining the
challenges that face the future of Afro-Sino relations and possible ways of overcoming them.

LOVING AND HATING

The growth in trade and investment between Africa and China in the last decade is truly staggering. Trade between Africa and China increased from $817 million in 1977 to $1.7 billion in 1990 and $3 billion in 1995, jumping to $10 billion in 2000 and $39.7 billion in 2005, and reached $55.5 billion in 2006 and is projected to rise to $100 billion in 2010. By the end of 2006, about 800 Chinese companies were operating in Africa (about 100 were medium and large state-owned) and they had invested $11.7 billion, up from about $6 billion in 2005, in sectors ranging from extractive industries, principally oil and minerals, to big infrastructural projects such as roads, railways, dams, and airports, to services especially telecommunications and retail trade. Chinese petty traders even began to appear on the streets of some African cities. The numbers of Chinese working or living in Africa for extended periods have reportedly swelled to 750,000. In the meantime, the number of Africans living in China is also growing. In 2006 Guangzhou reportedly had about 10,000 Africans comprised mainly of traders and students.

During the second FOCAC meeting, the first China-Africa business conference was held and it brought more than 500 entrepreneurs and 21 cooperation agreements worth $1 billion were signed, while at the 2006 Summit, business deals worth $1.9 billion were signed. In recognition of the growing economic importance of China, the African Development Bank—the continent's premier multilateral development agency—held its 42nd annual meeting in Shanghai in May 2007 (African Development Bank Group). The meeting was attended by a record 2,500 representatives from Africa, Asia and other parts of the world. This was the second time the ADB held its annual board meeting outside the continent; the first was in 2001 in Spain.

What drives this explosive growth in economic ties between Africa and China? What is its current and likely future impact on Africa? Is China, to echo an article in the South African Mail & Guardian, Africa's friend or foe, comrade or colonizer? (Nullis). Are we witnessing a new scramble for Africa, this time not among European powers but between the West and China? Is the China-Africa relationship a throwback to the imperialism of the nineteenth century or a sign of Africa's globalization in the 21st century? There are of course no shortages of views, whether of glee or gloom, some reminiscent of the old rhetoric of Third World solidarity, others full of trepidation, recalling Africa's tragic history of external pillage, warning Africa to be wary of the strangers from the east bearing flashy but flimsy gifts of dependency and underdevelopment.

Thus, there are three ways in which the Chinese-African relationship
tends to be framed: in terms of imperialism, globalization, and solidarity. As shown presently, the imperialist charge is leveled most loudly in western circles among policy makers, scholars, and media commentators. As Margaret Lee observes, in Western discourses Africa is a benighted continent in need of salvation, what she calls the ‘Saving Africa’ narrative or exploitation, the ‘naked imperialism’ narrative. In this binary, the West sees itself as tending towards the pole of salvation while it tars its competitors and adversaries, in this case China, with exploitative intentions.

To defenders of the China-Africa relationship, including many Chinese and African leaders and opinion makers, the relationship is driven by the age-old solidarity imperatives of Afro-Asian dialogue that have now mutated into South-South cooperation. China is depicted as a developing country with no history of external imperialism and incapable of being an imperialist power like the nations of the West, a country, moreover, that has unlocked the secrets of rapid development that other developing countries in Africa can productively follow.

Globalization analysis seeks to position the China-Africa relationship between the two extremes, that is, if globalization is stripped of the political associations attached to imperialism and solidarity and is understood simply as growing interconnectedness and exchanges between countries and regions facilitated by the new information and communication technologies that have compressed time and space. While, globalization has many dimensions—economic, political, cultural, and technological—involving intensified exchanges of capital and commodities as much as ideas and images, peoples and practices, values and viruses, those who discuss the China-Africa relationship are preoccupied with the flows of trade and investment. From this perspective, the growth of China’s relationship with Africa is often seen as rescuing Africa from marginalization into the world economic mainstream.

In reality, as I have argued at length elsewhere, the concept of globalization is an ideological one in so far it does not simply describe a historical process, for it also prescribes a project, a particular present—neo-liberal capitalism—and future for the world economy (Zeleza). Understood as a historical process, the world has been globalizing for a long time, although the process accelerated rapidly during the course of the twentieth century and continues to. Africa has been an integral part of these processes, central to the construction of the modern world in all its ramifications over the last half millennium. In other words, as Samir Amin has forcefully argued, Africa has never been marginal, notwithstanding the persistence of discourses about Africa’s marginalization. This does not mean the continent’s engagements with and contributions to globalization have necessarily been beneficial to its peoples. A more nuanced perspective of globalization requires us to historicize China’s relationship with Africa and untangle its many dimensions which are simultaneously complex, contradictory, and always changing.
Predictably hysterical and hypocritical are the commentaries from many western opinion and policy makers. Hardly a day goes by without media reports decrying China's growing involvement with Africa. This has become a cottage industry marked by a steady stream of conferences, publications, and dire warnings. The language is one of possessive paternalism, simultaneously disdainful and dismissive of both Africa and China, while bemoaning and dreading the loss of historic Euro-American hegemony over the continent. The message is loud and clear: China cannot be good for Africa, as the West has been. It is a discourse in which western benevolence and Chinese malevolence are assumed and compared, often unashamedly.

Typical is the three part series in The New York Times titled "New Power in Africa," which explores "China's deepening economic and political ties with Africa" (Howard and Polgren). In this narrative, the Chinese are flourishing in Africa because being corrupt and authoritarian themselves, they are not averse to doing business with Africa's corrupt and authoritarian regimes; they pay no heed to the ostensibly enlightened trading and lending criteria of western countries and their international financial institutions. Moreover, Chinese business in Africa is profitable because the Chinese workers they bring are themselves used to poverty: "While western companies must provide relatively plush and private accommodations to attract expatriate workers, the Chinese employees ... live in barrack like conditions, several to a room." As the Chinese move in, "the Western presence, once dominant, has steadily dwindled, and essentially consists nowadays of relief experts working international agencies or oil workers, living behind high walls in heavily guarded enclaves." (French and Polgren China's Trade).

Thus corruption, authoritarianism, and poverty provide China unfair advantage in African markets. Since western discourse on Africa is rooted in the moralistic language of the mercy industrial complex, the narrative goes further. Chinese-African economic relations are judged in the calculus of human rights rather than commerce. China, again in the imperious voice of a New York Times editorial, is the "Patron of African Misgovernment:"

Misspent your country's wealth? Waged war against an ethnic minority? Or just tired of those pesky good governance requirements attached to foreign aid by most Western governments and multilateral institutions? If you run an African country and have some natural resources to put in long-term hock, you've got a friend in Beijing ready to write big checks with no embarrassing questions. That's nice for governments, but not so nice for their misgoverned people ("Patron of African Misgovernment").

And so the Sudan torn by the Darfur crisis and Zimbabwe tarnished by economic collapse under President Mugabe's inept dictatorship are trotted as primary exhibits of the moral bankruptcy of the growing economic ties between
China and Africa. For good economic measure, it is pointed out China is using Africa as a training ground for its aspiring multinational corporations, and Chinese investment is leaving behind in these impoverished countries "a trail of heartbreak and recrimination," including the collapse of manufacturing industries, as well cultural misunderstanding, and growing hostility. No polls or surveys are needed of course; China cannot be the beloved West, Africa's benign benefactor for centuries.

Forget the extensive, scandalous, and enduring history of economic exploitation and support for dictatorships in Africa and across the world by western governments and corporations. China has still a long way to go to compete effectively against western companies that dominate the African oil industry. The point is that the West believes it owns Africa, which is rooted in the long history of western imperialism on the continent. In 2006 China received only 8.7% of Africa's oil exports, while Europe took 36% and the U.S. 33%. China's oil imports from Africa accounted for 14.5% of its total consumption comparable to the U.S.'s 13.2%. Incidentally, while in China 70% of oil imports were for industrial uses, 70% of US oil demand was for motor vehicles. U.S. dependency on African oil is slated to increase as growth in African oil production outstrips global production; it is projected to increase by 91% in 2002—25 compared to a global average of 53%. By February 2007 the supply of U.S. daily imports from Africa had reached 24%, surpassing the Middle East's 18.6%. No wonder the U.S. continues to support authoritarian rulers in oil exporting states, and is planning to build an American military command, or Africom, that poses new dangers of instability for the continent. Many commentators see Africom as the U.S. response to growing Chinese involvement in the continent and no African government so far with the exception of Liberia has expressed interest of hosting it (Lubeck, Glover and Lee, Volman).

And ignore the fact that China "often packages its oil deals with loans for infrastructural projects," long forgotten by western investors in Africa (Sautman and Hairong). According to World Bank estimates, China's Export-Import Bank infrastructure loans to Africa were estimated at $12.5 billion in mid-2006, more than the total western infrastructural aid to the continent. Some commentators contend loans tied to infrastructural projects are less likely to be siphoned through corruption than unpackaged western loans. And notwithstanding all the rhetoric about transparency, western oil companies and other natural resource companies continue to resist the campaign led by NGOs for mandatory disclosures of what they pay governments. So who are the real rogue creditors and investors in Africa, as the U.S. Treasury once called China?

Indeed, it is worth noting that democratic South Africa is one of China's two leading African trading partners (the other is Angola; China-South Africa trade was worth $8.5 billion in 2006); that in 2006 Africa accounted for a mere 3.2% of China's total trade estimated at $1.76 trillion, and that China's
main trading partners are the U.S. itself, the EU, Japan, and South Korea—all countries considered democratic. U.S.-China trade reached $203.9 billion in 2006 or 11.6% of China's total trade (the U.S. trade deficit was $148.7 billion). And while China has indeed overtaken Britain, its trade with Africa lags behind the US and France. In 2006, Africa-US trade rose to $99.5 billion (the US had a trade deficit of $61.4 billion), marking an increase of 23% over 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau).

African disquiet, and for some disgust, at western hypocrisy about China is poignantly captured by former Mozambican president Joaquim Chissano, the winner of the first $5 million Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership awarded in October 2007. He said:

Well, if the West is concerned about China's human rights record [as a reason to deter increasing trade with Africa], then perhaps African countries should reconsider trading with America because of their war in Iraq and their torture of prisoners in Guantanamo. . . . China is a country like any other, they will offer something that will give them benefit . . . but at the end of the day they have been open to a win-win situation. They know they are working with economically weaker partners, so they know how to facilitate things. But it is up to African countries to be careful to protect the interest of Africans (quoted in Tolsi 2007).

THE SEDUCTIONS AND SANCTIONS OF COURTSHIP

To many Africans, the West lacks any moral authority to criticize China's dealings with Africa because of its long and sordid histories of slavery, colonialism, and neo-liberalism that accounts for much of Africa's underdevelopment. Clearly, China's foray into Africa undermines not only the West's historic hegemony over the continent, it also underscores the shifting terrain and trajectory of contemporary globalization and the global balance of power.

The reality of the Africa-China relationship is a lot more complex, and exhibits contradictory tendencies that are often ignored or oversimplified in academic debates and popular discourses. To begin with, it is important to note how old Africa-China contacts are. It is not necessary in this context to trace the linkages to ancient Pharaonic times, or even to Zheng He's epic voyages between Asia and Africa in the early 15th century (1405–1433) forge important links between the two societies (Anshan, Duyvendad, Filesi, Snow, Jinyuan). During the first half of the 20th century, relations between semi-colonial China and colonial Africa were obviously limited, mediated as they were by the European colonial powers.

The situation changed after World War II War as revolution in China and decolonization in Africa restored sovereignty to both. The new era was marked
by the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Egypt in 1956; by 1978 China had diplomatic relations with 43 African countries. In 1963–4, Premier Zhou Enlai made his celebrated visit to Africa signaling China's diplomatic offensive on the continent that caused alarm in Western capitals. This was a period of the Cold War that was soon overlaid by the Sino-Soviet split. Not surprisingly, China courted anti-western and anti-Soviet countries and political parties. The policy of “exporting revolution” was strongest during the Cultural Revolution, when China and its African friends saw Maoism as a viable substitute for western capitalism and Soviet socialism (Yu).

Up to the late 1970s when China embarked on the “four modernizations” its relations with Africa were as much ideological as they were economic, motivated by anti-imperialism as well as economic cooperation, by the multifaceted imperative of national liberation. China saw itself as a former semicolon, a developing country, and a key leader of the non-aligned world; its international perspectives were framed through the prism of the “three worlds” theory. The construction of Tazara railway was only the most graphic example of its multifaceted partnership with Africa, which also involved educational, cultural, and technical exchanges, and support for liberation movements fighting European settler colonialism in Southern Africa (Yu). This is to suggest the tendency to distinguish between ideological and economic motivations and sequester them in the past and present, respectively, is analytically unproductive.

It was during this era that the principles of Chinese policies towards Africa were laid and continue to be invoked today: respect for sovereignty, equality, mutual benefit, and non-interference in others' internal affairs (Anshan China and Africa, Davies). The mutuality of interests and support was highly prized by both parties during the Cold War that often slipped into hot proxy wars in parts of Africa and the Third World. Chairman Mao Zedong famously attributed China's rising international standing to Africa: “We were brought back into the United Nations by our black African friends” (Anshan China and Africa 78). But even then it was an unequal relationship, as President Julius Nyerere readily recognized. Tanzania-China relations, he conceded, were between “most unequal equals.” It is more unequal now because China is a lot stronger economically and otherwise than it was a generation ago. This leads some to view China's economic dealings with Africa in terms of imperialism. In my view, as I will show presently, such a characterization is too simplistic.

The relationship between Africa and China entered a new phase from the turn of the 1980s as China embarked on rapid modernization and sought to re-enter the global economy. It was increasingly based on economic and political pragmatism. Ironically, many western commentators argued that Africa's importance to the “new” China would diminish. Writing in 1988 George Segal declared categorically: “It is hard to make a case that Africa matters very much to China” (115). The relationship would become more important for Africa
than China, he concluded. A decade later Ian Taylor argued Africa continued to be irrelevant to China in the 1990s; its value for China was largely diplomatic as a bulwark against the West enraged by the Tiananmen Square crackdown and against Taiwan in its drive for international recognition (Taylor).

It is quite revealing that scholars generally more sympathetic to Africa or in tune with Chinese foreign policy thinking saw matters differently. In 1988, George Yu maintained: "assuming China's continued 'open policy' on the global stage, the African theater is not likely to diminish in importance," a conclusion Payne and Veney echoed in 1998: "Africa plays a crucial role in the PRC's achievement of its foreign policy goals and that relations between China and Africa are likely to be strengthened and expanded as an important component of China's emergence as a global power" (Payne and Veney 867–8). Subsequent history has of course repudiated the prognoses of the former and confirmed that of the latter, which serves as a warning to those who relish in writing Africa off.

Many western scholars and policy makers have now somersaulted from dismissing Africa's importance to China (which is part of the age-old narrative of depicting Africa as marginal to the world at large) to exaggerating the dangers of Africa's colonization by China. But the warnings are not confined to cynical westerners; they are also expressed by some concerned Africans. For example, in 2006, President Mbeki warned "against allowing Chinese forays into Africa to become a neo-colonialist adventure, with African raw materials exchanged for shoddy manufactured imports, and little attention to developing an impoverished continent" (quoted in Faul). The South African commentator, William Gumede, virtually accused China of becoming Africa's new colonizer. It is quite revealing that some of the loudest warnings against China's colonialist or neo-colonialist ambitions come from South Africa, Africa's largest economy with its own hegemonic ambitions across the continent.

Clearly, China's recent interest in Africa is driven by its voracious appetite for raw materials, and search for markets, and investment outlets, a familiar textbook definition of imperialism. Africa remains the most resource-rich continent in the world. But 19th and 20th century western imperialism was made of much sterner stuff than is evident from or even possible with China's current engagement with Africa. Talk of China's "Scramble for Africa" is quite disingenuous. Africa, for all its weaknesses, is simply not susceptible to classic colonialism, precisely because of its very history with western imperialism and the protracted and horrendously costly struggles against it. This is not to argue that the relationship between China and Africa is not fraught with its own pitfalls. It is merely to call for more careful analysis, to avoid the hysteria of questionable historical analogies.

It is true that China's entry into Africa and world markets has ravaged textile manufacturing industries in many African countries. But it is well to
remember that the decline of the textile industry, indeed the process of de-industrialization in these countries, was facilitated by the disastrous neoliberal policies of structural adjustment imposed with fundamentalist zeal by western-controlled international financial institutions. Nor can the trading and tariff barriers against African manufactured exports in western markets be discounted. Specifically, the ruinous impact of second hand western clothing exports on the African textile industry needs to be noted. Thus, China’s effects on African manufacturing industry should not be exaggerated. The export similarity index, that is the overlap in the value of African and Chinese exports, is only 4% and is confined largely to textiles. In fact, in some countries, such as Lesotho, Madagascar, and Morocco, by 2006 the textile industry had recovered and weathered Chinese competition as they found new niches (Sautman and Hairong 13–19).

At stake, for Africa, is not China’s pursuit of self-interest, but the pursuit of Africa’s own self-interest, for it stands to reason that every country seeks to maximize its self-interest. Many Africans see China as an attractive alternative to the West that has exploited their societies ruthlessly over the centuries and continues to do so. China is valued as a possible source of development assistance and investment, as a development model, as a bulwark against western hegemony—a kind of economic neo-Cold War leader, or as simply an invaluable major new trading partner. The first three assumptions cannot fully withstand the glare of geopolitical realities.

At the Beijing Summit, China announced an aid package of $3 billion, a $5 billion investment fund, and offered to cancel $1.3 billion of debt to 31 African countries, set up 30 hospitals, 30 malaria prevention centers, 10 agricultural pilot centers, 100 rural schools, and double the number of African students studying in China to 4,000. For a continent of about 950 million, this is an insignificant drop in the ocean, although the quality of Chinese “aid” has historically tended to be higher than western “aid” because the Chinese do not include debt relief in new development assistance packages as western donors tend to. In fact, excluding debt relief, G8 “aid” to Africa declined by 2% between 2005 and 2006, notwithstanding all the promises made at the G8 summits and those misguided carnivals of African commiseration organized by celebrities seeking to rekindle flagging careers or gain the moral gravitas of mercy. Not surprisingly, African debt to China is paltry compared to the more than $300 billion the continent still owes after repaying $540 billion on loans of $530 billion incurred between 1970 and 2002 (Sautman 25).

It seems to me expecting China to be a significant source of development assistance is gravely mistaken. Both friends and foes of China tend to argue that the virtue or vice of Chinese “aid” is its lack of strings, that it is free from the notorious conditionalities of western “aid” donors. Chinese development discourse assiduously promotes this perception and African leaders tired of
being constantly lectured by the West are sometimes too eager to embrace it. But the proclamations of "soft power" should not be allowed to conceal China's hardnosed superpower ambitions.

Indeed, the size of Chinese loans and investment in Africa still pales in contrast to the western countries although it is growing rapidly. In 2003, the size of FDI in Africa from Asia in 2003 as a whole was only $7.9 billion compared to $20.8 billion from North America and $64.9 billion from Europe. From 1956 to 2005, China provided $44 billion in loans to Africa for 900 infrastructure projects. In mid-2006, China's foreign direct investment in Africa reached $1.2 billion, compared to $1.6 billion for the whole of 2005 (out of $57 billion in total Chinese FDI). China seeks to target its African investment in four key areas: industrial processing, infrastructure, agriculture, and natural resources. In October 2007, the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China, the world's largest bank by market capitalization, announced it would pay $5.5 billion for 20% of South Africa's Standard Bank. This represented the largest Chinese acquisition in the financial sector ever and the single largest foreign investment in South Africa.

Chinese investment is clearly growing, but there is little evidence so far that Chinese investors behave differently from other investors. They want high returns on their investment, even if unlike much western investment in Africa, Chinese investment tends to involve equity joint ventures with African enterprises. The Chinese are not coming to Africa for philanthropy but to make money. They are in the business of business. To date, China remains a small provider of "soft loans" to the continent. This of course is changing. By 2007, Angola alone had received loans worth $6 billion in infrastructure projects. In 2007, China's Export-Import Bank pledged an additional $20 billion in infrastructure and trade loans over three years, while the G8 had managed to deliver only $2.3 billion of the $25 billion pledged in 2005, much of which consisted of debt relief, rather than new money. In September 2007 China signed a $5 billion deal to build infrastructure in the Congo Democratic Republic to the shock and consternation of western governments and international financial institutions.

Chinese development "aid" is as tied as any and it does not differ, in its composition, from western aid, in so far as it is composed of loans, grants, and technical assistance. What is clear is that China has its own conditionalities: economically its "aid" recipients are expected to patronize Chinese firms and procure Chinese goods and services, and politically to adhere to the one China policy. And the jury is still out on whether the Chinese will resist, in their future aid packages, the pernicious western habit of counting everything in their dealings with Africa as "aid," from loans and debt relief, to technical assistance and educational scholarships. And what could be more pro-China than the practice by Chinese companies of bringing workers from China in situations where local labor could easily be procured?
In fact, there are reports that because of their relative unfamiliarity with African workers, they sometimes act in offensive, if not outrightly, racist manner. It was partly in response to this challenge that at the Beijing Summit the Chinese government issued a code of conduct for Chinese businesses in Africa, the so-called Nine Principles that called for respect for local laws, worker's labor rights, transparency, and environmental protection, among other things. More fundamentally, there is no “Beijing Consensus” that is qualitatively different from the Washington Consensus as far as challenging the framework of the international economic system.

The notion that there exists a Beijing Consensus, popularized by Joshua Ramo, has attracted journalists and scholars fearful of China's exponential rise or yearning for a bipolar world reminiscent of the past, and appeals to many in China proud of the Chinese achievement and in Africa and elsewhere in the global South anxious to emulate it (Ramo, Sautman 14-18). In reality, China's economic emergence does not contest let alone undermine, ideologically, the unipolar world of the post-Cold War era, even if it pluralizes the centers of economic power. Arif Dirlik is right in seeing the Chinese model “not as an alternative to the neo-liberal Washington Consensus, but more as a method of moderating its spatial, social, and political consequences within the parameters set by that consensus” (5). In fact, neo-liberalism with Chinese characteristics offers at this historic juncture a way to salvage “a capitalist world economy that is unprecedented in its destructiveness, by suggesting the sustainability of such an economy rather than its final demise” (Dirlik 2).

Thus, notwithstanding the official rhetoric, it is important to note that the Chinese economic juggernaut is on an apparently inexorable capitalist path that offers no real alternative model for Africa. Indeed, for many progressive African critics of China's African policy, the Chinese model of development without democracy is anathema. The African social imaginary has always been guided by three fundamental quests: for self-determination, development, and democracy that brooks no trade off between them, especially following the democratic struggles and gains of the last two decades. India may provide a much better model in this regard.

This is not to downplay the enormous historical achievements of Chinese capitalism, the extraordinary capacity it has demonstrated, which is almost unprecedented in human history, to uplift hundreds of millions of people from abject poverty in such a short time. It is merely to caution against the tendency to view Africa as a developmental tabula rasa awaiting the inscription of models from abroad. When modernization theory and prescriptions reigned supreme western countries were seen as the models, and under the wrath of dependency theory the former Soviet Union, and indeed, socialist China, were proclaimed models. It cannot be overemphasized that Africa needs to develop
its own models, its distinctive paths to development, carved out of its specific and complex histories, rather than the histories of others, however inspiring.

Thus, it is simplistic, even mistaken, for Africa to see China as an economic bulwark against Euro-America, let alone as the solution to its pervasive challenges of development. But China's emergence as an economic powerhouse does offer the continent new opportunities to diversify its economic partners. It is only in this sense that the "China card" offers Africa some respite. Indeed, many commentators attribute Africa's relatively buoyant economic growth over the past few years—5.5% in 2006 and a projected 5.9% in 2007 and 5.8% in 2008—directly to the continent's rising trading relations with China and Asia in general, and indirectly to the insatiable appetite for raw materials by the roaring economies of China and India, which have boosted global primary commodity prices.

BEYOND THE HONEYMOON

The challenge for Africa is to turn the proceeds from this temporary commodity boom into investments for economic diversification and sustainable development, and avoid frittering them away in conspicuous consumption and capital exports to western banks. Economic history, certainly the economic history of the continent, teaches us that the long-term trend is towards falling primary commodity prices, declining terms of trade for primary producers. In short, industrialization and diversification away from reliance on raw materials remain historical imperatives for Africa's future, which no amount of trade with China or Asia can offset.

As Africa's relations with China grow and deepen, so will the perils and possibilities. Pressures will increase to change the patterns of trade and labor practices; unsafe production and environmentally destructive practices will face greater challenge; the divergence of national and corporate interests, on both sides, are likely to test the rhetoric of strategic partnership; and civil societies in both China and Africa will demand greater accountability about the benefits and costs of the relationship. As a historian, let me hasten to add, that none of us really know the long-term trajectory of this remarkable relationship. Crystal-gazing is an art best left to soothsayers.

Whatever the future holds, Africa needs to know more about China, coordinate its policies on China, and define its interests and relations with China realistically. Knowing more about China falls in the realm of education and research, studying China seriously, its language, history, and culture, as well as its economic and geopolitical interests and calculations. It also entails more vigorous educational and cultural exchanges, the establishment of centers of Chinese studies in African universities as the University of Stellenbosch, Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Nigeria, and the University of Zimbabwe have
done, and independent think tanks on China that can advise African governments and businesses. Indeed, Africa ought to do this for all the major powers and regions of the world, including the West which we assume to know, sometimes superficially and often unstrategically, by virtue of our intimate histories of slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

Coordinating Africa’s China policy is a simple question of numbers. China is a country of 1.3 billion people and a $2.8 trillion economy. Africa’s 54 countries combined have a total population of 945 million and an economy of $2.6 trillion (at purchasing power parity). There is simply no African country that, by itself, can negotiate effective terms of engagement with China, or any of the major powers and regional blocs, by itself. The imperative for African unity remains as pressing as ever, if not more so with the emergence of the new economic powers of Asia. The African Union and its organs such as NEPAD, as well as regional agencies like ECOWAS, SADC, the Maghreb Union, EAC, and COMESA ought to take the lead in this process.

But governments being what they are, it is unlikely that they can spearhead effective strategies for progressive engagement with China. They need the constant prodding of civil society organizations (CSOs) and activists. African civil society actors together with trade unions, working creatively and strategically with capital and the state itself, within and across national borders can help to ensure that labor standards are respected, living wages are paid, and the human rights of African workers are upheld. Efforts need to be made to forge coalitions and networking beyond Africa’s borders, with groups and activists overseas, in this case in China and Asia more broadly.

The challenges of forging productive linkages between African and Chinese civil societies are immense. History serves as a double edged sword. It saves China from the pernicious legacy of slavery and colonialism that afflicts relations between Africa and Euro-America, but it also deprives the Africa-China relationship of the intimacies of familiarity and the mediations of the enduring African diasporic presence at the very heart of Euro-America. In this context, the historic meeting between African and Chinese CSOs on the margins of the ADB meeting in Shanghai in May 2007 is heartwarming. It marked an important step that needs to become a regular feature of Chinese-African relations.

Together, CSOs as well as academics and other concerned groups must put the feet of governments and businesses in Africa and China to the fires of accountability and transparency. Certainly, the devastating environmental impact of Chinese companies working in Africa’s extractive industries like oil, gas, mining, and logging, are no different from those of companies from elsewhere working in Africa, or Chinese companies operating in China itself where 320 workers reportedly die each day from unsafe working conditions (Anshan 85). The convergence of interests of states and capital must be matched, and countered, by the solidarities of social movements.
It is the agency of the ordinary peoples of Africa that ultimately thwarted the colonial ambitions of Europe and the authoritarian propensities of Africa's own postcolonial ruling elites, and which will save Africa from any would be new or old colonial or neo-colonial predators. Already Chinese firms and workers have become prey to rebel attacks in Niger and Ethiopia, as well as popular and political opposition in countries such as Zambia. For its own sake, China needs to learn more about Africa, as Africa needs to learn more about China, as their political and business leaders celebrate the incredible growth in economic relations between the peoples of these two remarkable lands.

Notes
1. The original shorter version of this paper was written as a blog essay on The Zeleza Post, www.zeleza.com, September 4, 2007; this longer version was presented at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York, November 13, 2007.


3. The first world comprised the superpowers, the second the intermediary powers of Europe, Canada, and Japan and Oceania, and the third the developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

4. According to Sautman and Hairong, between 1979 and 2000, the latest period for which data is available, 46% of Chinese FDI went into manufacturing (including 15% for textiles), 28% to resource extraction, 18% to services (mostly construction), and 7% to agriculture.


6. See the website of the center at: http://www.ccs.org.za/scholarships.html

Works Cited


