
Book Review

The New Presence of China in Africa

Meine Pieter van Dijk (ed.)

Amsterdam University Press, with EADI, 2009, 224pp., €37.50, ISBN: 9789089641366

European Journal of Development Research (2010) 22, 135–137. doi:10.1057/ejdr.2009.51

This is of course a very important subject that has exercised many minds recently, and it is great to see a European Association of Development Research and Training Institute (EADI)-affiliated publication on it. The book is part of a very rapidly growing literature,¹ at a time when China's global role continues to increase, becoming Africa's major trading partner as this book highlights, but also gradually taking its rightful place at international institutions, all reinforced with the financial crisis that China appears to be weathering better than most and – as highlighted in a recent Institute of Development Studies (*IDS Bulletin*) – increasingly providing an attractive development alternative.²

The book rightly highlights the many different aspects of and actors in Chinese involvement in Africa. In some of the writing on the subject the 'rise of China' has been seen as either a threat or a potential, and in doing so there is a tendency to see China – and indeed Africa – as a unitary actor, whereas closer review of course highlights complexities and contradictions. The book includes case studies, on Zambia and Sudan in particular and this is complemented with an editor's overview of the varied impact in five countries and various sectors. Of course, the economic presence of China manifests itself very differently in different places on the diverse African continent, and has a very varied political impact too, as is evident from the case study of Zambia (by Bastholm and Kragelund, though it would have been helpful to see more on the recent anti-Chinese sentiments there). The book also has a very interesting and exploratory chapter on the potentials of responsible production in Africa, by Peter Knorrnga, which opens yet another critical angle on the impact that China may have.

Chapter 2 by de Beule and Van den Bulcke highlights the links and continuities between China's domestic reforms and its external strategy. Its economic development model has drastically changed its foreign policy positioning. The complementarity between the two has most recently been expressed in the twin slogans of harmonious society and harmonious world, and it is critical though by no means easy to keep track of the rapidly changing policy objectives and slogans. Further, and perhaps less well covered in the book, it remains important to see the China–Africa links in its broader context, as they continue to be a relatively small part of China's foreign strategy notably to supply its future energy and raw material needs, and with East Asia for example being relatively more important in terms of broader economic links.

The chapter on Chinese aid by Jean-Raphaële Chaponnière no doubt will be of great interest to many. It gives a good basic overview, but insights into the system and motives remain limited: though there is a gradual opening to talk about Chinese aid, there has not been a public debate, or indeed the capacity to implement the suddenly very large commitments (the implementation of the aid programme remains a very small part of the work of the Ministry of Commerce). While China will clearly chart its own way, it is equally interesting that there has been a great deal of activity in building up relations and collaboration between Chinese-aid agencies and the 'old donors', generally driven by the latter.³ The World Bank

has been busy building up relations with China, starting from its work in China itself that is generally considered successful, as are bilateral donors like the UK, and USAID has even opened an office in Beijing. The OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has taken initiatives to bring China to the table and for example start a DAC-China Study Group. To understand China's global impact, and to build up the donor collaboration or coordination that is important, one needs to start from a good understanding of why China does what it does, and there will be many more studies that follows this one, and much more debate about whether China through its aid programme will challenge existing aid paradigms and practices.

The editor has provided a very useful summary of the book, discussing China's varying objectives, and different types and levels of involvement, the opportunities such as loans and prices for exports and threats such as replacement of local labour and increased debt, and for example the relative merits of Chinese and older donors' approaches, and their respective trade policies – issues that will continue to divide analysts, and indeed some question (wrongly, in my view) the morality of westerners to make such comparisons. In that context, van Dijk argues that as China has benefited from globalization, it can help Africa do so too. While on the surface this looks plausible, and attractive of course, this also highlights how much better we need to understand the rise of China. It is equally plausible to argue that China has not (just) benefited from globalization, but – and the recent global financial crisis has illustrated this – it has played a critical role in creating the current phase of capitalism: in 1978 it provided a capable labour force that became the motor of supercapitalism as Robert Reich called it, and moreover saved enough to fund the excessive borrowing in the West. Most African countries lack the preconditions China had in 1978, of stable government, capable administration that has reformed itself many times since, a well-fed healthy and educated labour force, land reform and so on, and therefore are unlikely to replicate China's success.

The editor indeed rightly argues (though this appears to contradict the view on benefiting from globalization) that the Chinese model is not an alternative for Africa, but lessons from China for Africa are of great relevance, for at least two reasons. African leaders have shown great interest in learning these lessons and China is now keen to provide these, as part of the 'soft power' that accompanies the hard economic and global politics. And we should not under-estimate the potential of trying to distill what aspects of China's development successes and shortcomings are of relevance for others. There are aspects of Chinese approaches that can and will be helpful, but these are in specific approaches at the micro-level, rather than at the level of an elusive 'Beijing Consensus' as an alternative to an outdated 'Washington Consensus'. In any case, to help articulate those lessons as well as better understanding of the direct impact of China in Africa, we need to have an in-depth understanding of China, an understanding that is typically absent in the international development community. How we understand China's development path can be critically important for how we think of Africa's chances, about, for example chances to replicate insertion into the global markets, and development more generally. This is gradually being addressed through publications like this one, but, moreover there is an enormous opportunity to promote joint work on China and its role in Africa, together with Chinese and African researchers.