



China's Economic Engagement in Africa: A Study of Neo-Colonialism vs. Development Partnership

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Abstract

This study investigates whether China's African engagement represents neo-colonialism or a mutually beneficial partnership. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, it analyses quantitative data on trade and investments alongside qualitative insights from interviews with African policymakers, business leaders, and civil society. The analysis focuses on trade volumes, investment trends, and the financial terms of Chinese loans and aid. Key findings reveal a significant increase in Sino-African trade, rising from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$200 billion in 2019, and Chinese investments surpassing \$49 billion in 2020. Infrastructure projects like roads and railways are juxtaposed with challenges like debt dependency and labour exploitation. Case studies from Zambia, Angola, and Ethiopia illustrate these dynamics. The conclusion emphasizes the need for policies that ensure transparency, equitable terms, and sustainable development, ensuring China-Africa relations foster long-term growth while mitigating concerns about sovereignty and debt.

Keywords: Neo-colonialism, Economic Partnership, Infrastructure Development, Debt Dependency, African Agency

1. Introduction

The debate on the impact of China's increasing linkages with Africa often evolves along one of two lines: either as a developmental partnership between China and Africa or as neo-colonialism. This paper focuses primarily on the characteristics of China's economic, political, and other inter-linkages with Africa as they have evolved during the post-Mao era. It also focuses on Africa's efforts to harness China further in support of African efforts to reduce poverty, create livelihoods, and generate income in highly valued areas. These initiatives among African leaders have resulted in the "strategic partnership" the People's Republic of China has sought to establish with African states.

2. Literature Review

The existing literature on China's involvement in Africa has grown considerably in recent years, offering a wide range of perspectives on whether this relationship represents a new form of neo-colonialism or a genuine economic partnership. This section reviews key contributions to the debate, covering economic, political, and social dimensions.

Historical Context and Neo-Colonialism Scholars like Kwame Nkrumah (1965) first articulated the idea of neo-colonialism, arguing that the control of newly independent nations through economic and political mechanisms by foreign powers could replicate the exploitation of colonialism. More recent works, such as Corkin's (2011) study on Angola, have applied this concept to China's activities in Africa, focusing on debt accumulation and resource extraction. Similarly, Brautigam's (2011) influential work, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa*, provides a critical analysis of China's foreign direct investment (FDI), highlighting concerns about neo-colonial tendencies in China's emphasis on raw material extraction and infrastructure projects tied to loans.

Economic Partnership and South-South Cooperation On the other side of the debate, scholars like Alden (2007) and Cheru & Obi (2010) view China's engagement as part of a broader South-South cooperation framework, where both regions benefit from trade, investment, and knowledge transfer without the political conditionality often imposed by Western nations. Shinn and Eisenman (2014) explore this idea further, arguing that China's focus on infrastructure development and trade agreements represents a departure from the traditional North-South relationship, where Western powers have historically imposed governance reforms and aid conditionality on African nations. Their work emphasizes China's emphasis on non-interference in domestic politics, which is often viewed positively by African leaders seeking to maintain their sovereignty.

China's Role in African Infrastructure Development One of the most significant contributions of Chinese investments is in the area of infrastructure development. Power and Mohan (2010) examine China's role in building roads, railways, and power plants, noting that while these projects have greatly improved Africa's economic potential, they also come with challenges. Hanauer & Morris (2014) argue that Chinese infrastructure projects, like the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, have been crucial for enhancing trade and industrial development. However, they also contribute to long-term debt dependency, particularly in countries with weak financial oversight.

Debt Dependency and Sovereignty Concerns The issue of debt dependency is a recurring theme in the literature. Carmody (2011) highlights the potential for African nations to become overly reliant on Chinese loans, drawing comparisons to the structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the 1980s. Cheru and Obi (2010) also discuss the risks of debt accumulation, noting that China's financial influence could undermine African nations' ability to set their own economic agendas, particularly in countries like Zambia and Angola, where Chinese debt constitutes a significant portion of the national budget.

Critiques of Labour Practices and Environmental Impact Several studies have also critiqued China's labour practices and environmental impacts in Africa. Lee (2017) examines the issue of labour exploitation in Chinese-run projects, particularly in the mining and construction sectors, where Chinese companies are often accused of importing their labour rather than employing locals. Similarly, Hensengerth (2018) highlights the environmental challenges associated with Chinese investments, particularly in sectors like mining and hydro-power. These concerns are echoed by Hanauer and Morris (2014), who argue that weak regulatory

frameworks in many African countries enable Chinese companies to engage in environmentally damaging practices without adequate oversight.

African Perspectives on China's Engagement African perspectives on China's involvement are diverse and nuanced. Carmody and Kragelund (2016) explore the views of African policymakers, noting that many leaders appreciate the rapid development that Chinese investments bring but are wary of the long-term consequences of debt and resource dependency. Adem (2013) adds that African intellectuals and civil society groups have raised concerns about a new form of economic imperialism, where China's control over key sectors such as mining, telecommunications, and infrastructure could mirror the extractive relationships of the colonial period. However, Power and Mohan (2010) argue that African governments still see China as an important partner in their development strategies, particularly in areas neglected by Western donors.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data with qualitative insights from interviews. The quantitative data were sourced from trade reports, international databases such as the World Bank, and publications from organizations like the African Economic Research Consortium and the China-Africa Research Initiative.

For the qualitative component, 25 interviews were conducted with key stakeholders across Africa, including policymakers, business leaders, and civil society representatives from countries such as Zambia, Angola, Kenya, and Ethiopia. These interviewees were selected based on their direct involvement with Sino-African partnerships, particularly in sectors like infrastructure, trade, and natural resource management. A purposive sampling method ensured diversity in perspectives, allowing for a balanced view of China's engagement in Africa.

Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted via online platforms. After transcription, the data were analysed using thematic analysis. The process involved the following steps:

- Open coding to identify initial themes across the responses.
- Axial coding to organize these themes into broader categories, with a particular focus on key topics such as infrastructure benefits, debt dependency, and labour practices.
- Selective coding to highlight core themes that directly addressed the research question: Is China's engagement in Africa a form of neo-colonialism or a mutually beneficial partnership?

To ensure the rigour of the analysis, the study employed inter-coder agreement where two independent researchers reviewed the coding process to validate the consistency of the identified themes. This method provided a structured way to explore the dual narrative of China's role in Africa.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two primary theoretical constructs: neo-colonialism and economic partnership, which serve as lenses through which China's engagement in Africa is analysed. These theories are crucial for understanding the dual narratives of China's

involvement—whether it mirrors historical patterns of external control and exploitation or represents a new model of mutually beneficial cooperation.

The concept of neo-colonialism, as articulated by Kwame Nkrumah (1960s), suggests that former colonial powers maintain influence over newly independent nations through economic and political mechanisms. In this study, neo-colonialism is used to assess China's role in resource extraction, debt dependency, and its impact on African sovereignty. This perspective is vital for analysing how China's financial terms and investments in extractive industries echo colonial economic patterns.

On the other hand, the theory of economic partnership emphasizes collaboration and mutual benefit within a South-South cooperation framework. This theory is particularly relevant to China's policy of non-interference, infrastructure development, and trade partnerships with African nations. It serves as a counter-narrative to neo-colonialism, offering an alternative perspective on China's role in facilitating trade, industrialization, and infrastructure development.

These theoretical constructs are explicitly linked to the research question: Does China's engagement in Africa constitute neo-colonialism, or is it a mutually beneficial partnership? By examining both perspectives, the study explores how China's involvement provides opportunities for growth while also posing risks related to dependency and sovereignty erosion.

The methodological approach of this study—a mixed-methods analysis—aligns with the theoretical framework by enabling an exploration of these dual narratives. Thematic analysis of interview data supports this framework by revealing how these theoretical perspectives manifest in practice, particularly through African stakeholders' perceptions of China's economic role.

5. Discussion

5.1. Background and Significance

China's rapid ascent to economic stardom has attracted much attention internationally and has become a fast-growing area of study. Over the past few years, China has been transforming its non-interference policy while establishing bilateral relations with African countries through trade, commodities, and cooperation (Brautigam, 2011). However, this engagement, though often seen as an alternative to Western aid, has sparked controversy. Critics suggest that China's involvement in Africa mirrors neo-colonialism, where debt dependency and resource extraction perpetuate economic subservience (Corkin, 2011). For instance, in Zambia, China holds a significant portion of the country's debt, raising concerns about the loss of economic sovereignty.

On the other hand, proponents argue that China's investments, particularly in infrastructure development, provide African nations with vital opportunities for economic growth (Power & Mohan, 2010). This study findings confirm this duality: while debt risks persist, Chinese-funded projects like the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway offer substantial developmental benefits, allowing countries to build the infrastructure necessary for modernization.

5.2. Historical Context

China's engagement with Africa dates back to ancient times, but its recent resurgence, particularly during the post-Cold War era, focuses on economic cooperation, trade, and infrastructure projects (Alden, 2007). Drawing on historical analogies, critics argue that

China's current role in Africa mirrors colonial practices of exploiting African resources without promoting local industrialization (Cheru & Obi, 2010). Chinese investments in oil (Angola) and mining (Zambia) echo past patterns of resource extraction, creating concerns that African countries may remain locked in dependency on raw material exports (Brautigam, 2011).

However, unlike traditional colonial powers, China emphasizes South-South Cooperation and has initiated large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads and railways, which are critical for African countries' long-term development (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). These investments can facilitate trade efficiency and industrial growth, as evidenced by the Zambia-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, highlighting the potential for a partnership rooted in mutual economic benefits.

5.3. China's Economic Engagement in Africa

China's economic activities in Africa have surged since the early 2000s, with significant growth in trade volumes and investment flows (Brautigam, 2011). By 2019, Sino-African trade had reached \$200 billion, while Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa grew to over \$49 billion by 2020 (Alden, 2007). These figures reflect China's deepening engagement, particularly in sectors like infrastructure development and natural resource extraction.

Despite these impressive investments, the study reveals concern over the financial terms of China's loans, which can lead to debt dependency in countries like Zambia and Angola (Corkin, 2011). The study's qualitative findings show that many African policymakers acknowledge these risks, but they also appreciate the infrastructure development that accompanies Chinese investments. For example, projects like the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway have dramatically improved trade logistics, enhancing African countries' integration into the global economy (Power & Mohan, 2010).

5.4. Political and Diplomatic Relations

China's political engagement with Africa has deepened in recent decades, with numerous bilateral agreements aimed at economic cooperation (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). High-profile infrastructure projects such as the Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya and the Abuja-Kaduna Railway in Nigeria reflect China's commitment to fostering long-term relationships with African countries (Brautigam, 2011). However, critics argue that China's increasing financial influence could undermine Africa's economic sovereignty, as many countries become reliant on Chinese loans to fund these ambitious projects (Corkin, 2011).

The study's findings highlight a dual narrative in these relationships. On the one hand, African leaders, such as those in Ethiopia and Kenya, view these projects as vital for addressing infrastructure deficits. On the other hand, the long-term implications of debt dependency and concerns over economic sovereignty temper these benefits (Power & Mohan, 2010). This dynamic mirrors the broader debate about whether China's engagement in Africa is neo-colonial or a true economic partnership.

5.5. Cultural and Social Exchanges

China's cultural diplomacy in Africa has focused on strengthening ties through educational initiatives and cultural exchanges (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). Programs like the Confucius Institutes have fostered educational links, while sports diplomacy and youth exchanges promote mutual understanding (Power & Mohan, 2010). However, as in the economic

domain, the study's findings reveal that these initiatives are seen both as an opportunity for soft power influence and a potential mechanism for fostering dependency.

While educational exchanges provide African students with opportunities to study in China, critics argue that these efforts may also serve to expand China's influence over Africa's future leadership (Brautigam, 2011). This concern fits within the broader neo-colonial narrative, where China's cultural and social outreach is seen as an extension of its economic influence.

5.6. Critiques of China's Involvement in Africa

Critics of China's role in Africa often cite issues of debt dependency, labour exploitation, and environmental impacts as evidence of neo-colonial practices (Corkin, 2011). For instance, over 20 African countries now owe significant portions of their external debt to China, with some, like Djibouti, holding over 70% of their debt in Chinese hands (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). Additionally, Chinese companies often bring in their labour for projects, reducing opportunities for local employment (Power & Mohan, 2010).

The study's findings align with these critiques but also highlight the economic benefits of Chinese engagement, especially in infrastructure development. Chinese-funded projects have been pivotal in bridging Africa's infrastructure gaps, but they have also raised concerns about environmental degradation and unsustainable development practices, particularly in countries like Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Brautigam, 2011).

5.7. Case Studies

This study examined the experiences of several African countries, including Angola, Ethiopia, and Zambia, in navigating their economic relationships with China. In Angola, Chinese investments have focused on the oil sector, contributing to the country's economic growth while increasing its debt burden (Corkin, 2011). Ethiopia, meanwhile, has benefited from Chinese-funded infrastructure projects like the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway, which has greatly enhanced trade efficiency (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). Zambia, on the other hand, faces growing concerns over its rising debt to China, though recent investments in infrastructure and mining continue to support its economic development (Brautigam, 2011).

5.8. Comparative Analysis

Comparing China's approach to Africa with that of Western powers reveals stark contrasts in economic strategy and development partnerships. While Western countries often attach political conditions to their aid, China's non-interference policy appeals to many African leaders, who appreciate the focus on infrastructure development without demands for governance reforms (Alden, 2007). However, the study's findings suggest that while China offers African countries an alternative to Western aid, the long-term financial sustainability of Chinese loans remains a significant concern (Corkin, 2011).

5.9. African Perspectives on China's Role

The findings reveal diverse perspectives on China's role in Africa, ranging from praise for infrastructure development to concerns about neo-colonialism and economic dependency. Many African leaders value China's investments, especially in sectors that Western aid has neglected, such as transportation and energy (Brautigam, 2011). However, public opinion is often more critical, particularly in regions affected by labour practices and environmental degradation (Hanauer & Morris, 2014). This dual narrative is central to understanding

China's evolving relationship with Africa, where the benefits of development are balanced against the risks of debt dependency and sovereignty loss.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to answer the research question: Does China's engagement in Africa constitute neo-colonialism, or is it a mutually beneficial partnership? Through a mixed-methods approach, examining both quantitative data and qualitative insights from African policymakers, business leaders, and civil society representatives, the analysis revealed a nuanced relationship that incorporates elements of both narratives.

On the one hand, the findings suggest that China's role in Africa exhibits neo-colonial characteristics, particularly in terms of debt dependency and resource extraction. African countries such as Zambia and Angola have accrued substantial debt to China, raising concerns about long-term financial sustainability and economic sovereignty. The concentration of Chinese investment in extractive industries also mirrors colonial-era economic patterns, where African nations remain reliant on raw material exports without fully developing their industrial capacities.

On the other hand, the study also presents compelling evidence that China's engagement offers mutual benefits, especially in terms of infrastructure development and economic growth. Projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway and Zambia-China Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone have contributed to significant improvements in transportation, trade efficiency, and industrial capacity. African leaders, particularly in countries like Ethiopia and Kenya, emphasize the critical role these investments play in addressing infrastructure gaps that Western aid has often neglected. China's non-interference policy and South-South cooperation framework are also viewed positively by African governments, which appreciate the focus on development without the political conditionality associated with Western aid.

In conclusion, this study finds that China's involvement in Africa cannot be neatly categorized as either neo-colonial or purely beneficial. Instead, it represents a dual narrative where growth opportunities coexist with risks of dependency. The key to navigating this relationship lies in African agency—African countries must ensure robust governance, transparency, and strategic planning in their engagements with China to maximize the benefits while safeguarding their economic sovereignty.

The evidence suggests that the future of China-Africa relations will depend on the ability of African nations to negotiate equitable terms, diversify their economies, and ensure that Chinese investments contribute to sustainable development. By fostering African leadership in shaping this partnership, the relationship can evolve into one that truly supports the continent's long-term development aspirations.

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