

China-Africa and an Economic Transformation: Edited by Arkebe Oqubay and Justin Yifu Lin *Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 368 pp., £69.00 (Hardback), ISBN: 9780198830504*

Motolani Agbebi
Tampere University, Tampere, Finland
Motolani.agbebi@tuni.fi

Investigating China's potential role in triggering economic transformation in Africa, Arkebe Oqubay and Justin Lin have published a timely, carefully compiled edited volume. The volume features thought-provoking ideas from leading scholars on China, Africa, and China-Africa relations. With the forum on China-Africa cooperation (FOCAC) entering its 21st year, the informative and rigorous analysis on the history, current status and trajectory of China-Africa engagement, presented in this volume, is a vital contribution.

The idea that China's engagement could trigger industrialisation and structural transformation in Africa has been highlighted within existing scholarship (Brautigam & Tang 2011). The literature on China-Africa relations oscillates between two competing views: Sino-optimism and Sino-pessimism (Adem, 2010). Sino-optimist scholarship suggests China is a force for good in Africa, while Sino-Pessimism infers China's engagement resembles neo-colonialism, and could hamper Africa's development. In this volume (consisting of four parts), the editors and contributing authors offer a balanced assessment of the China–Africa relationship, avoiding extreme and simplistic views.

Part 1 comprises two chapters, which describe China's rise and the changing development discourse. In Chapter 3, Celestin Monga argues that the Chinese economy is a global public good and assesses the benefits and risks of China's economic emergence for the global economy. Monga emphasises the importance of national economic policy in a globalised world and explains how a collapse (or malfunctioning) of China's economy carries crucial global implications. In his detailed assessment of China's position in global trade and investments, Monga highlights China's contribution to global economic growth. Recent events further underscore China's continued contribution to the global economy. Even during the slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese economy was the only major economy to achieve growth (2.3% in 2020).

Part 2 contains three chapters that introduce the context, perspectives, and framework of China–Africa relations. These chapters are useful for anyone new to China–Africa relations and for those seeking to understand the institutional arrangements forming the basis of the diplomatic relationship between China and African countries. Two central arguments are worth highlighting. First, the different phases of the relationship have mainly been influenced by events, issues, and economic and political developments in China rather than in Africa. Second, China's engagement with African countries is managed through numerous institutional actors, which are introduced by Ian Taylor in Chapter 6. Taylor posits that these institutional actors which includes foreign policy actors, policy banks, think tanks, Chinese provinces, and FOCAC are not as coordinated nor unified in their practices as imagined when implementing Beijing's foreign policy towards Africa. Although, he did not discuss at length the many non-institutional actors such as private enterprises whose activities also shape the engagement, Taylor's chapter clarifies the difficulties faced by China's central leadership to control the activities of these various actors.

Part 3 examines the dynamics of China–Africa economic engagement in terms of investments, loans, infrastructure, labour regimes, and Africa's natural resources. The six chapters include country-specific cases on Nigeria, Angola, and Sudan. In Chapter 7, Deborah Brautigam, a leading scholar of China–

Africa relations, offers valuable insights into Africa's debt capacity, the role played by Chinese loans in supporting Africa's economic transformation, concerns over Chinese lending, and China's responses to the African debt crisis in the early 2000s. Part 3 concludes with Carlos Oya's critical examination of the enduring negative claims about labour dynamics in China-Africa economic engagement. Relying on case study evidence of Chinese labour practices in different African countries, Oya offers an empirically nuanced assessment of the labour dynamics within the engagement.

Part 4 contains three chapters and revisits the main premise of the volume by examining the opportunities presented by China's economic rebalancing, signalled by the overseas relocation of China's light manufacturing industries. In Chapter 14, Oqubay and Fantu Cheru introduce Ethiopia as one of the few African countries to have engaged with China strategically and steered Chinese investments to catalyse industrialisation. They show how the Ethiopian government developed a strategic partnership with China to drive Ethiopia's growth and transformation plans (GTP), with the aim of shifting from a primarily agrarian economy towards industrialisation. Pivotal to Ethiopia's success was strong political leadership, strong policy ownership, and a willingness to engage in policy learning and transfer. The authors surmise that variations in outcomes from Chinese engagement on the continent can be attributed to the varying degree of strategic approaches adopted by African governments towards China.

Overall, China remains in the driver's seat of engagement with African countries, according to this volume. Except for the chapter on Ethiopia, African agency is unintentionally downplayed in the volume. There is less focus on African countries' experiences in navigating their relationship and deploying their agency. This approach reflects Shinn's conclusion in Chapter 4, that the China-Africa relationship is largely dictated and steered by China

The volume concludes that China's engagement with Africa has provided economic opportunities (including jobs and infrastructural development) and that African countries can capitalise on these opportunities and embark on their own economic transformation. By collecting analytical inputs from seasoned scholars of China-Africa relations belonging to various disciplines, Oqubay and Lin have compiled a powerhouse volume that is rich in insights and thought-provoking arguments.

References

- Adem, S. (2010). The Paradox of China's Policy in Africa. *African & Asian Studies*, 9(3), 334–355.
- Bräutigam, D., & Xiaoyang, T. (2011). African Shenzhen: China's special economic zones in Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 49(1), 27–54.