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SOCIOLOGY OF DISCOURSE ON CHINA- AFRICA RELATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between China and Africa, or Sino-African relations, has come under scrutiny recently, with more articles and books having been written about it in the last ten years than in the preceding fifty years all combined.¹ Despite the generous attention, however, the nature and outcome of this relationship are still far from clear. Implicitly or explicitly, analysts have certainly sought to address the inescapable question of whether or not China is a force for good in Africa. The empirical evidence, however, seems to lend support to the contradictory claims that China is looting Africa and that it is developing the continent. This is so partly because the knowledge we acquire from the discourse is a social knowledge that is based on judgment and interpretation in which similar empirical facts could lead to different conclusions and *vice versa*. It is also so because the discourse takes place at different levels: ideological, political and intellectual. The risk is, thus, real that the more one reads about China in Africa, the less one knows about it. The substantial literature and the competing claims about Sino-African relations, therefore, suggest that there is a need for a disciplinary framework, disciplinary in both senses of that term. This article seeks to make a modest contribution toward that end by addressing the following questions. What are the divergent perspectives about Sino-African relations? How did they emerge? What are the driving forces behind them? Is the sustained discourse about Sino-African relations a good thing for Africa in any case?

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1. Introduction

Does discourse represent reality, or does it construct it? The answer we give to this deceptively simple question says much about our intellectual orientation. This essay is based on the premise that discourse not merely represents 'reality,' but also it produces meaning, with empirical 'evidence' used as much for obscuring some aspects of the 'reality' as for highlighting others. In other words, discourse constructs reality.

The discussion in this essay is laid out as follows. Part one outlines the major contradictions in China's current diplomacy in Africa. Part two examines the contending perspectives engendered partly by these very contradictions. Part three focuses on the dominant perspective in Africa today. The fourth part is summary and conclusion.

From an African (-ist) perspective the issue surrounding the discourse about Sino-African relations boils down to whether China's stepped-up activities in Africa are a boon for the continent. In this universe of discourse are, on the one hand, *Sino-pessimists* who see China as exploitative which is not only already sucking Africa's resources in order to fuel its own rapid industrialization but also is bound to destroy Africa's development potential in the process. On the other hand, there are *Sino-optimists* who perceive China as the ultimate savior, capable of or willing to "develop" Africa. Between the two divergent views are those sitting on the fence for the time being, the *Sino-pragmatists*, who, although less sanguine about the potential outcome of Sino-African relations, are willing to reserve judgment until the "dust settles".

The emergence of these perspectives can be explained first in terms of the contradictions in Chinese activities in Africa in recent years, the dualism of China's diplomacy in Africa. One element of this dualism is manifested in China's tendency to invest both in resource-

rich countries — such as Angola, Sudan, Congo Republic, Equatorial Guinea and Nigeria — and in countries not yet known for producing or having resources critically important to China — such as Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, Mozambique, Tanzania, Liberia and Madagascar.

Another manifestation is the multiplicity of actors on the part of China ranging from the state, semi-private enterprises, and private companies to private individuals. Then there is China's emphasis on both bilateralism and multilateralism. China today has diplomatic relations with forty-four countries in Africa, and China has more consulates in Africa than the United States does.² In addition to one-on-one relations with African governments on a bilateral basis, China also has shown inclinations for diplomatic engagement about African issues with inter-governmental and regional organizations. Presently, China has representatives in the African Union (AU), the New Economic Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).³

The fourth expression of this diplomatic duality relates to China's contributions to peace and conflict in Africa. In recent years Chinese personnel contribution to peacekeeping operation activities in Africa has increased substantially. As of 2011, China has 1600 personnel serving in United Nations Peace Keeping Operations in Africa. Comparatively, the U.S. has only 30 personnel.⁴ However, China's arms have also contributed directly or indirectly to the perpetuation or, in some cases, escalation of violent conflicts in places ranging from the Congo and the Sudan to the Horn of Africa.⁵ China's share of the conventional arms market in Sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to be approximately 15 percent.⁶

Finally, there is the issue of China's collaboration with and defiance of the West both at the same time. China has on some occasions acted *in tandem* with, for instance, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and other multilateral institutions on issues relevant to Africa. On other occasions China has

ignored the principles of some of these very institutions. China is a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) but not the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In short, China sometimes accommodates US hegemony in these institutions and, at other times, it challenges the legitimacy of US hegemony.

The duality of China's diplomacy in Africa is also partly a reflection of the heterogeneity of African actors with all their contradictions. The continent is home to countries that are diverse in their resource-endowment, level of political stability and nature of governance. But the ambiguity of China's behavior is sustained by issues that are far wider than what goes on in Africa itself, including the constraints imposed upon China, the aspiring hegemon, by the structure of the prevailing international system. For this reason, analysts still wonder, for instance, whether China is/would be a "radical revisionist" or a "moderate reformist" internationally. It is not also clear for the same reason whether the re-emergence of China represents the rise of Eastern capitalism or the beginning of the end of capitalism altogether. There are signs that point to all of these predispositions in China's international behaviors.

In spite of the fact that there is not yet a clear pattern of China's political economy and its diplomacy in Africa, or because of these facts, divergent perspectives now dominate the discourse.

The perspectives about Sino-African relations are also divergent because of the inherent nature of perspectives. Any given perspective by definition not only highlights a certain part of reality to some extent, but it also simultaneously makes the other part invisible. Since social facts acquire meaning through interpretation and judgment, relative to where we stand in the society, optimists, pragmatists and pessimists about the impact of Sino-African relations can, thus, all point to aspects of the dualistic Sino-African relations which support their respective positions.

There are other relevant factors, too, about how these perspectives emerged and why they co-exist. One of these relates to the fact that China is a relative newcomer to Africa as an aspiring major power. This means that Sino-African relationship has not yet fully crystallized and that it is too early to assess the wider impacts. In this sense it is the

interplay between the fluidity of the current state of Sino-African relations and the underlying wishes, hopes and fears about the future direction and impact of this relationship which gave rise to the divergent perspectives. It is fair to say, therefore, that these perspectives reflect the variable possibilities of the outcome of Sino-African relations which, we must add, are contingent upon factors internal to China, Africa and the global political economy in general.

2. Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism and Sino-pessimism

We have identified above three perspectives which inform the current discourse about Sino-African relations: Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism and Sino-pessimism. These perspectives roughly parallel, but are broader than, what Chris Alden called the three strands of thought about Sino-African relations, namely: China as development partner; China as economic competitor, and China as colonizer.⁷ Ian Taylor, another prominent scholar of Sino-African relations, has also addressed the same notion, however less explicitly.⁸

For Sino-optimists, China's re-entry into Africa is to be celebrated. Africa stands to gain much from closer ties with China. They also see in the rise of China a de-occidentalization of capitalism, accepting the notion that the logic of capital is *not* the same irrespective of who is at the driver's seat. The tone of Sino-optimistic literature on Sino-African relations is commendable. The former president of Botswana, Festus Mogae, asserted recently, "...had China not come into existence as a partner for us we would have needed to create her."⁹ Ethiopia's Prime Minister was even more emphatic: "[t]he Chinese interest in Ethiopia [and presumably in Africa] has been nothing short of god-send,"¹⁰ Another Sino-optimist declared: "China is the only global power laying the tracks for an Africa-wide economic renaissance."¹¹

Optimists remind us about the greater attention China has paid to Africa in recent years. They also point to the overall positive performance and encouraging trends in African economies in the first decade of this century, a decade that coincided with China's increased activities in Africa.¹² Additionally, Sino-optimists point to the scores of projects ranging from roads, dams and bridges to the Chinese-sponsored

special industrial zones which are under construction in some African countries. These projects, Sino-optimists say, attest to China's commitment to Africa's industrialization.

For Sino-pragmatists, on the other hand, China's greater involvement in Africa could be neo-colonial in its consequence, if not in its intent, since the logic of capital is the same whether those in the driving seat are Europeans, Americans or Chinese. Sino-pragmatists point to the generally unchanged terms and structures of Africa's economic interactions with China vis-à-vis those with the West. While China's exports to Africa are processed and manufactured goods, the overwhelming proportion of China's imports from Africa are primary products. However, even so, the pragmatists add, China could have a more lasting and positive impact in some countries, and not in others, in some sectors, and not in others. Which scenario is fulfilled and where this would be so in turn largely depends not only on what China does but also on the type of policy environment created by African governments. Pragmatists also hasten to add that it is nevertheless too early to make a sweeping judgment whether or not the disadvantages of a deeper Sino-African economic engagement would outweigh the advantages for Africa.

A variant of Sino-pragmatism also maintains that the possibility of African renaissance hinges not merely on transforming the old order but also on building a new one. As Sarah Raine put it, "...handled properly, China's interests in Africa present an opportunity for African development..."¹³ Sino-pragmatists are generally more accommodative of China in Africa not only because Africa's more recent experience with the West had not benefited the continent but also because China was coming to Africa without the historical baggage of slavery and colonialism.¹⁴ Sino-pragmatists hope that something good would come out of Africa's closer economic interactions with China and that it is, therefore, at least premature to dismiss the potentialities. In this tone, one Sino-pragmatist has said recently: "Let us give the Chinese a chance in Africa...then put their feet to the fire if and when they do not do right by Africa...but before then, I am unwilling and quite splendidly disinterested in joining the bandwagon of hostilities directed at China..."¹⁵

For Sino-pessimists, China's behaviors in Africa are reminiscent of the behaviors of European powers in the nineteenth century when the industrial revolution motivated them to "go out" in search of raw materials and markets. Sino-pessimists warn that the impetus behind China's "go out" policy too, is the same: the need for resources and markets. The major difference, according to Sino-pessimists, is that China has now re-calibrated its approach and its rhetoric to the requirements of the twenty-first century, with the slogan of "developing mission," taking the place of "civilizing mission." In this vein, Sino-pessimists point, for instance, to the similarities between the Chinese and Western aid to Africa such as its tied nature, its minimal contribution to capacity building, its seemingly singular focus on resources and future commercial opportunities, and insist that both are instruments for achieving certain strategic and diplomatic objectives, that both are instruments for gaining access to resources, and that both seek to benefit employment at home.

Sino-pessimists critique the lopsided nature of Sino-African relations even as they recognize China's renewed interest in Africa and its increased investment in the continent. They are also quick to add that China's investment in Africa is generally more resource-seeking than efficiency-seeking, and, in the long term, this will inevitably deepen and reinforce the structural distortions of African economies which include the lack of economic diversification and the production and export of agricultural commodities and other primary products.

Sino-pessimists, thus, argue that Africa's engagement with China would perpetuate the structure of dependency and underdevelopment which is already in place and, moreover, inhibit or block Africa's efforts to overcome them, hindering industrialization and reinforcing the old imperial division of labor in which Africa provided raw materials to Europe and bought consumer and industrial goods in return. It must be mentioned that Sino-optimists also do not deny the fact that China's investment in Africa favors primary products or natural resource development. However, they also point out that compared to Africa's traditional development partners, China has been more engaged in the infrastructure sector in Africa, and that would positively affect the efficiency of African economies in the long-term. Sino-

optimists further remind us that the steady increase in China's investment in the continent is a cause for celebration for a continent that is not known for attracting foreign direct investment.

Although Sino-optimism, Sino-pragmatism and Sino-pessimism can be separated for analytical purposes, as we have tried to do above, it is often hard to do so in practice. Even in studies that acknowledge the existence of divergent perspectives, a clear statement regarding which one is more sensible is hard to come-by.¹⁶ Only rarely do analysts spell out explicitly the singular perspective which informs their analysis. This is precisely why we need a set of strategies for teasing out the underlying perspective from the seemingly disinterested historical and descriptive analyses about Sino-African relations. The question, thus, becomes: what are these strategies?

We can begin with ontological commitment of an analyst which is often reflected in the theme or subject-matter of the analysis. We ask, what is the *problematique* of the discourse about Sino-African relations?¹⁷ To choose or single out a topic for investigation is not a neutral act. What we believe is the "big" question worthy of answering, our research interest, in other words, also reflects the political, social and cultural milieu within which we are located. One would not, for instance, expect an optimistic reading of Sino-African relations from works which are concerned with "China loots Africa" or "China's expansion in Africa" or "China's invasion of Africa" as principal themes of investigation.¹⁸ It would not also be illogical to expect a sympathetic reading of China in Africa from works which purportedly seek to show how China is "challenging Western hegemony in Africa," or how China is an "all-weather friend."¹⁹

It must be pointed out here that two analysts could see China in Africa as a challenger to the West but, for ideological reasons, subscribe to different perspectives, one embracing Sino-optimism if he or she approves of the challenges, and the other identifying with Sino-pessimism, if he or she does not. Similarly, would a greater emphasis on Chinese interest in Africa's extractive sectors to the exclusion of other aspects of the relationship imply a Sino-pragmatist or Sino-pessimist perspective? By the same token, an analysis which exclusively deals with China's investment in the infrastructure sector in Africa is likely to

lead to a more optimistic conclusion about the impact of China in Africa than one whose subject matter is China's oil diplomacy in Africa.²⁰ The perspectives of many writers on the subject nevertheless betray greater subtlety and require digging deeper into the text in order to grasp the underlying perspective, keeping in mind that normative commitments are most potent in analysis especially when they are least explicit.

As a supplementary strategy, therefore, concepts that are deployed in an analysis can be considered.²¹ If the key concepts of a discourse about Sino-African relations are, on the one hand, "China's scramble for Africa," "China's re-colonization of Africa," and "China's new colonialism," the analyst is most probably approaching the relationship from a Sino-pragmatic or a Sino-pessimistic perspective.²² On the other hand, if the key concept is, for instance, "strategic partnership" between Africa and China, the writer could be a Sino-optimist. Could we also get clues from the national identity or geographical origin of the analyst? The answer is yes, to some extent, but only if used with care. Not surprisingly, most Chinese analysts seem optimistic about the outcome of Sino-African relations for both sides, as are many Africans. Nonetheless, not all Westerners are Sino-pragmatists, or Sino-pessimists, just like not all Africans are Sino-optimists.

The discourse about Sino-African relations can also be classified, following a methodology developed by critical theorist Robert Cox, into one of problem-solving and critical variety, with the former focusing on order and stability in the international system and the latter engaging issues of legitimacy and justice.

Is there a relationship between the ideological predisposition of an analyst and his/her perspective with regard to the discourse about Sino-African relations? When we look back at the recent history of the discourse about development, we learn that two themes have been dominant. On the one hand, there was the view held by Marxist and left-wing intellectuals that global capitalism has the propensity to underdevelop Africa and that the solution was for Africa to disengage itself from it. On the other hand, right-leaning intellectuals saw the process of economic exchange between Africa and the West as a positive-sum game, beneficial to both sides, even if the benefit was never equal.

A variant — or distant relative -- of this paradigm maintained it was just too late to disengage from global capitalism, even if it was desirable to do so.²³

Those with strong ideological persuasion somehow tend to be clearer in their perspectives, whether they are Sino-optimists or Sino-pessimists, than those who are less “ideologically-bound”. Partly for this reason those who are ideologically “less bound” often seem to draw conclusions about Sino-African relations which are both safe and balanced but also sometimes intellectually less useful.

Subsequent to China’s latest arrival in Africa left-leaning intellectuals seem to be reversing their position by advocating Africa’s deeper engagement with China and by suggesting that this could accelerate Africa’s own development. At least at the moment there seems to be a correlation between ideology and discourse about Sino-African relations. If one is leftist, one is also likely to be a Sino-optimist.

3. The Predominance of Sino-optimism

If the three perspectives are all articulated in contemporary discourse, it is Sino-optimism which captures the prevailing public and intellectual mood in Africa. This is in sharp contrast to what is increasingly the case in Europe and in the United States.²⁴ One senior African diplomat has recently argued:

... the relationship between China and Africa is coming under close scrutiny, but mostly, not in an objective manner, rather in a manifestly biased way which totally excludes the *African perspective*...[T]he *colonial perspective*, the condescending attitude towards Africa, is still vibrant.²⁵ (Emphasis added.)

The African perspective the diplomat was referring to is, of course, Sino-optimism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Sino-optimism has been embraced almost uniformly by Africa’s ruling elites in all corners of the continent.²⁶ It is also true that China’s activities in Africa have wider support among ordinary Africans. One logical question we can ask, therefore, is this: why is Sino-optimism so predominant in Africa today?

A distinction has to be made, as suggested above, first between what may be called vertical Sino-optimism, which is the attractiveness of China to Africa's elites and horizontal Sino-optimism, which is the attraction China commands among ordinary Africans. It is true to say virtually all of Africa's rulers see China as a genuine partner in the effort to overcome the challenges of modernization. Because China has repeatedly expressed solidarity with African countries,²⁷ that is to say, political elites in Africa are almost certain that China could, and even would, ignite Africa's economic modernization. This is the notion of China as Africa's partner for development. On this, on the one hand, there are those who, using a looser definition of partnership, say that China already is a partner. China is after all buying more from Africa, is selling more to Africa, is investing more in Africa, and is lending more to Africa. On the other hand, there are those who point out that China benefits more than Africa from all of these transactions by virtue of its being the stronger party and that China is, therefore, not a partner of Africa any more than other major countries in Europe or North America. In fact, the "traditional partners" of Africa seem more critical in terms of the level of assistance Africa receives.²⁸

Africa's elites also view China as a model. The reasoning involved here is, first, that the socio-economic condition in China is broadly similar to those in Africa. In this vein, Africa's leaders have echoed what Ai Ping has asserted: "...China and Africa share similar national conditions and are both faced with the same historical task of vigorously developing their economies".²⁹

The second, and related, reason why China is regarded as a model has more to do with China's success in modernizing its economy in a relatively short period of time. In 2005 China ranked 119th, far behind Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa in GNI per capita in US dollars.³⁰ In 2008 China's GNI per capita ranked 100th, still below countries like Angola, Namibia and South Africa.³¹ In 2009 China became the top exporter of goods and services in the world, with a 9.6 percent share of the global trade, surpassing the United States and Japan. China was 17th in the share of global export as recently as in 1985.³² In August 2010 China became the second largest economy in the world, replacing Japan which had held that position for many decades.

Thirdly, China is viewed as a model also because the developmental paths chosen by a number of African governments are believed to be consistent with China's own developmental trajectory. What this also means is that China does not have to try to influence the policies of African governments through its loans, investment and aid.

The view that China could serve as a model for Africa is not also without its detractors. Notwithstanding the rhetoric about the commonality, and even similarity, of the challenges to Chinese and African development, the African condition could not be more different. Needless to say, China's rapid economic growth in recent years was possible because of the convergence of coincidences of domestic and external factors. The domestic factors included, first and foremost, the 1979 reform which opened up the economy for business, China's potentially huge domestic market, its large pool of low cost and highly disciplined workforce and the strong sense of national purpose which pervades the society. One could also add the positive role played by the Chinese Diaspora including those in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Another relevant factor was the existence of an open trading order internationally. This convergence triggered a fast-paced economic growth in China that is based on heavy inflow of foreign direct investment and massive export of manufactured goods.

For the critics of Sino-optimism in Africa, China is growing because of its unique internal qualities and favorable international condition, and this set of conditions which, unfortunately, cannot be simply replicated in Africa. Granted, China and Africa share similarities in their political systems and, especially, in the role their respective governments (or ruling parties) play in the national economy. However, China's economy is growing rapidly in spite of these shared elements, not because of them and, on this consideration alone, the relevance of China for Africa as an example-setter becomes extremely limited.

The notions of China as a partner and a model are, of course, not inseparable. One could admire and emulate China as a model without buying into the idea that China would (have to) be a partner, capable of and committed to igniting economic modernization in Africa. To the extent that China's interests are dynamic and expansive, which they are, it does not indeed automatically follow that the two would also

remain compatible indefinitely. In other words, China would continue to be a partner of Africa to the extent that it is also in China's own interest to do so,³³ but China could continue to stimulate Africa's effort to modernize its economy even long after China ceases to be Africa's partner.

Among ordinary Africans, at least three elements of China's diplomacy have captured their interest, sustaining horizontal Sino-optimism in the continent. The first is the emphasis on China's own diplomacy in the building of visible and symbolic projects such as dams, conference halls and roads that are designed not only to deliver services but also produce the "meaning" of solidarity. China's approach, in this regard, is sometimes obvious. Sometimes it is subtler.

Secondly, China's approach emphasizes projects which are instantaneous and tangible, projects that give ordinary people concrete power of choice. A project that is aimed at building roads and dams is more tangible to ordinary people than one whose goal is promotion of democracy and good governance. The simple observation made recently by the President of China's Export-Import Bank elucidates this. To the critics of the Bank's policy of lending money to African regimes with poor human rights records, he said: "roads and radios are more urgent needs for Africans than human rights and freedom."³⁴

The third relevant element in China's attractiveness to ordinary Africans emerges from sheer human solidarity or empathy. Chinese expatriate workers are seen often toiling in the least hospitable weather and environmental conditions in Africa. Mindful of the number of Chinese who had lost their lives in the last few years in Ethiopia's Ogaden desert and in the plains of Tekeze River, Ethiopians are, for instance, generally grateful to the Chinese for rendering their service at great personal risk to themselves. "In some Ethiopian towns and villages," wrote an Irish journalist recently, "it is not uncommon for foreigners to find themselves being greeted by children yelling "China, China"."³⁵

Would Sino-optimism endure in Africa in the long haul? It depends upon the extent to which the rising expectations of Africans are met, expectation which, ironically, Sino-optimism itself has created.³⁶ These expectations will be met in turn only if African governments make strides in improving the economic well being of Africans. One

measure of whether Africa is on the right track in this respect is to look at the changes taking place in the economy. Although further studies are necessary to assess more fully the extent and forms of the impact of China in Africa, it is fair to say that the record so far is mixed at best.

4. Conclusion

The generous attention which Sino-African relations has received in recent years is not without its perplexities in some ways.³⁷ Let us first consider China's relative standing in Africa in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI). Even after allowing for the mystery and complexity which has generally shrouded China's official statistics, the level of investment of other Asian countries in Africa is more substantial than China's. China ranked only fourth, after Malaysia, India and Singapore in terms of investment in Africa in 2004.³⁸ In 2008 the level of Singapore's investment in Africa was larger than that of China.³⁹ Why, then, did China get attention that by far exceeded the attention given to other Asian countries in this context? In response to this question, some would say, China is a would-be hegemon unlike the other three. If this is the right answer it should be only in part, since there are, as elaborated below, other issues too.

The second aspect of the perplexity of the discourse about China in Africa is highlighted by the regional distribution of China's FDI. From China's total overseas FDI in 2006, the share of Africa was relatively small, four percent, compared to Latin America's 26 percent and Asia's 64 percent.⁴⁰ China's trade and official development assistance also shows a generally similar pattern.⁴¹ Why, then, did Sino-African relations attract and get more attention than, say, Sino-Latin American relations? Would it be, as some have claimed, that it was the huge "infrastructure deficit" in Africa which greatly magnified China's investment by leaving a major footprint? This theory also is less convincing because China's investment in Africa was too modest compared to other major powers to leave in its wake a major footprint. China's FDI in Africa is only a fraction of that of the UK, US, and France.⁴²

If the empirical evidence, thus, shows that Sino-African relations were not yet the most important relations both for Africa and for China,

what, then, was the driving force behind so much interest in Sino-African relations? A tentative answer would be that the deep interest was partly a reflection of the inevitable reaction to China's accelerated activities in Africa and around the globe. It was the pace rather than the scale of China's activities in Africa which stimulated the imagination of many.

China was perceived to be posing a threat in Africa to the West. The clarion call was sounded, which was perhaps best encapsulated in the headline of a British newspaper: "How China is Taking Over Africa...and Why We in the West Should be Very Worried."⁴³ The result of this form of narrative was in any case the emergence of a sustained discourse about the "China threat" in Africa, a special type of Sino-pessimism, whose frame of reference was not whether or not China was a force for good in Africa, but whether or not China in Africa was a bad thing for the West.

These Sino-pessimists were convinced that China would be posing a threat in Africa to longstanding Western interests at least in two ways. On the one hand, there was the generally growing popularity of the Chinese model of development among some of Africa's ruling elites as a realistic alternative to the Western approach. Increasingly, the promise of this model in Africa was beginning to be contrasted with what was regarded as the failed model of neoliberal capitalism. Congressman Chris Smith, former chair of the sub-committee on Africa in the United States House of Representatives, recently articulated the "China threat" in this way: "People like Bashir [of Sudan], Mugabe [of Zimbabwe] and so many others love the Chinese model of control and secret police...I am very worried about the influence of their bad human rights and bad governance model is having..."⁴⁴ At a higher level of abstraction, British scholar Ian Taylor was also referring to the same phenomenon when he pointed to the accusation leveled at China in Africa for "reifying the neo-patrimonial regimes."⁴⁵

The U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's target, too, was clear when she remarked in Lusaka, Zambia in June 2011: "We saw that during colonial times, it is easy to come in, take out natural resources, pay off leaders and leave. And when you leave, you don't leave much behind for the people who are there. We don't want to see a new colo-

nialism.”⁴⁶ It was out of these considerations that the discourse of the “China threat” was born in the West. The heated Sino-pessimist discourse inevitably excited the interest and captured the attention of many Africans and Africanists, too. Sino-optimism and Sino-pragmatism were, thus, reactions to Sino-pessimism in which the steadily increasing influence of China in Africa was seen as part and parcel of a process of systematically delegitimizing the prevailing neo-liberal order and the authority on which it is based.

Let us pause for a moment and ask: does China really pose a threat to the West in Africa? The answer to this question depends on our perspective. If we assume Sino-African relations would continue to grow and expand, it would follow that China would increasingly compete with the West for some of the strategic raw materials and markets in Africa. Even so, however, the West, China and Africa would all benefit from a positive improvement in the African condition, so says liberal theory of international relations, for all sides would be better off and all would gain in absolute terms under this scenario. Incidentally, this is the perspective of those who advocate engaging China, a group of analysts sometimes known as “the engagers.” They see China as a potential rival but not necessarily as an enemy and believe that China could be socialized into the rules of the prevailing system. If political realism informs our observation and analysis, however, the West would be the ultimate loser as a result of China’s rise since the issue becomes one of relative gain, about who will get how much more compared to the other side. This is the view of “the adversaries,” those observers who see China as an adversary in the making that must be contained everywhere and by all means. The image of international anarchy from the perspective of “adversarians” is purely Hobbesian.

In 2009 American scholar Deborah Brautigam published *The Dragon’s Gift*.⁴⁷ The book, written from a Sino-optimistic perspective, was significant because the author is credible in what she says due to her intimate knowledge of China and Africa. The subtitle of the book, *The Real Story of China in Africa*, also suggests it was perhaps designed as a corrective and balanced alternative to the dominant Sino-pessimistic discourse so common in the West. The suggestion here is not necessarily that China’s activities in Africa have no long-term ad-

verse effect on the West. Indeed, China is carefully shaping the environment under which its rise as a major global power is realized, and is doing so under a unique constraint imposed by a unipolar international system which encourages China to be less forthright about its intentions and ambitions.

We have highlighted above the parallel course which is traversed by Sino-pessimism in the public and intellectual arena. However, such parallelism is not limited to Sino-pessimism. Sino-optimism, too, shows similar inclination. In November 2004 a high-level Ethiopian delegation visited China. The visit took the delegation to Shanxi province, an exemplary province in economic growth, especially in irrigation development activities, and instrumental in China's rapid agricultural development. The delegation also visited a "model" city, one that reportedly managed to extricate itself from poverty in a short period of time.⁴⁸ As head of the delegation, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi would later remark: "Chinese transformation disproved the pessimistic attitude that "if you are poor once, you are likely to be poor forever."⁴⁹ At about the same time American political scientist Horace Campbell, too, was arguing: "The rapid rise of China is testament that poor societies can rise beyond colonial exploitation and the mangled priorities of societies which ensure that colonial societies remain a producer of raw materials."⁵⁰ Even if we do not wish to link political scientist Campbell in any way to Ethiopia's leader, the similarity in their language is still remarkable.

Is Sino-*philia*, the growing public and intellectual interest in Sino-African relations, a good thing for Africa? Before we answer this crucial question, we should distinguish between the concept of Sino-*philia* and its cousins. A Sino-pessimist, a Sino-optimist and a Sino-pragmatist could all be considered Sino-*philes* to the extent that they devote extensive attention to the nature and impact of Sino-African relations. A Sino-*phile* is, however, not necessarily Sino-fanatic or Sino-apologist; but a Sino-optimist can be at the same time Sino-fanatic. Similarly, a Sino-optimist can concurrently be a Sino-phobe to the extent, for instance, that the individual was convinced Sino-African relations would benefit Africa in the long-term but loathes China for its role in propping up "neo-patrimonial regimes" in the continent. Sino-euphoria

can be the opposite of Sino-pessimism. We have pointed out above the distinction in the discourse between “the adversarians” and “the engagers.” We can now add that all “adversarians” are Sino-pessimists, but all “engagers” are not necessarily Sino-optimists. Twenty years from now, or, possibly even sooner, Sino-pragmatism will have outlived its purpose for, by then, either Sino-optimism or Sino-pessimism will have been vindicated.

In general, the proliferation of the discourse about Sino-African relations, what we have called Sino-*philia* above, is a good thing for Africa. However, a discourse about this discourse is also badly needed from time to time, a discourse which is not only designed to induce China's greater involvement and more positive impact in Africa but also a discourse which aspires to unmask the discourse. Our goals as scholars must include challenging the notion that there is the ultimate perspective, the supreme epistemology, which is unchanging and is independent of our representation. Given the role discourse plays in the construction of reality, it is also a good thing that Sino-optimism now prevails in Africa, because we know that social reality is born out of concerted action around a belief which a discourse enables, even if that belief is sometimes far removed from reality.

ENDNOTES

1. Though less widespread, there is also growing interest in “Africa in China”. See, for example, Rapahael-Hernandez and Steen (2006); Rashidi and Sertima (2009); and Wyatt (2010). China's accelerated activities not just in Africa but around the world have also come under scrutiny in recent years. What is curious about the discourse on China in Africa is that those who initially showed significant interest in the relationship were neither Chinese nor Africans. It is partly this feature of the discourse which makes a fuller understanding of the nature of the discourse and its driving forces all the more important. For excellent collection of Japanese, American and European discourses about Chinese activities around the world from different angles see, among others, Ash et al. (2007) and Casarini (2009).

2. Shinn (2011, p.2).

3. For useful insights about the emerging relationship between China and the African Union, see, Ali (2009, pp.32-34).

4. Shinn (2011, p. 2).

5. This paradox is illustrated in Taylor (2009), esp. Chapters 5 & 6. For a deep analysis of China's military relations with Africa, see, Shinn (2008, pp. 155-196).
6. Shinn (2011, p.2).
7. Alden (2007, pp.5-6).
8. Taylor (2009, p.3).
9. Mogae (2009 p. 21). Also, see, Shelton (2007, pp.232-267).
10. See, M. Fitzgerald, 'China invests in Ethiopia but at what cost?' *Irish Times* [Online] 'China invests in Ethiopia but at what cost?' January 27, 2011. <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2010/0127/1224263206337.html>, accessed January 29, 2011.
11. Dayo Olopade, "China's Long March Across Africa," August 6, 2008; <http://www.africa.com/blog/blog,chinasslongmarchacrossafrica,6.html> (Accessed on April 29, 2010).
12. See, C. W. Dugger, "Report Offers Optimistic View of Africa's Economies," *The New York Times*, June 24, 2010, p.A.20.
13. Raine (2009, p. 4). Also, see, Cheru and Calais (2010, pp.221-242).
14. If anything, China's historical contact with Africa was said to be peaceful. See, Dreyer (2007).
15. Paul Adujie, "Re: China Bashing & Foreign Investments in Africa," USAafricadialogue@googlegroups.com (Accessed July 26, 2010).
16. For instance, see, Alden (2007) especially "Introduction" and "Chapter 5".
17. "When we research or teach," wrote international relations scholar Steve Smith, "we either explicitly or implicitly give that topic a status and we also locate it within a view of the world that reflects our cultural/social/ economic and political location." See, Smith (2008, p.729).
18. See, for instance, Chaldeans Mensah, "China's Foray into Africa: Ideational Underpinnings and Geo-economic Interests," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, Volume 4, Number 3, <http://www.academicjournals.org/ajpsir/pdf/pdf2010/March/Mensah.pdf>, also Michel and Beuret (2009); Andrews (2010, pp.1301-131).
19. See, for example, Campbell (pp.119-137); Wenping (2007, pp.24-47).
20. Example of the former may include, Foster *et al.*(2008) and of the latter, Lee and Shalmon (2008, pp.109-136).

21. As a group of international relations scholars have recently argued in a different context, "our choice of observation to be made and concepts to be applied will be driven by our research interest. Do we want to control complexity? Do we want to solve a social problem? Do we seek understanding?" See, Friedrichs and Kratochwil (2009, p.715).
22. For a systematic response to many of the issues raised by Sino-pessimists, see, Anshan (2008, pp. 21-49).
23. For a concise and systematic analysis of the history of development paradigms, see, Mittelman (2010): Mittelman, James H. "The Development Paradigm and Its Critics." *The International Studies Encyclopedia*. Denmark, Robert A. Blackwell Publishing, 2010. Blackwell Reference Online. April 26, 2011<[http://www.isacompendium.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g97814443365976_chunk_g97814443365976_ssl-9](http://www.isacompendium.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781444336597_chunk_g97814443365976_ssl-9)>
24. According to a recent survey, for instance, 53 percent of Germans, 66 percent of Italians and 70 percent of French consider China as a threat. See, Casarini (2009, p.178).
25. Tekeda (2010).
26. A notable exception is Thabo Mbeki, the former president of South Africa, who reportedly said: "...China can not only just come here and dig for raw materials [but] then go away and sell us manufactured goods." Quoted in Taylor (2009, p.3).
27. Position Paper of the People's Republic of China at the 65th Session of the UN General Assembly. <http://et.China-embassy.org/eng/zgxx/t752288.htm> (Accessed October 14, 2010).
28. In 2008 Ethiopia received \$ 35 million from non-DAC countries in terms of aid and debt relief compared to \$3.3 billion from DAC countries. See, *Africa Development Indicators 2010*, pp. 100-101. See, also, Bautigam (2011, p.2).
29. Ping (2005, p.233).
30. Yongpeng (2007, p.275).
31. <http://bbs.chinadaily.com.cn/viewthread.php?gid=2&tid=652470> (Accessed March 20, 2011).
32. *Chugoku Joho Handbook*, Tokyo: Sososha, 2010, pp. 380-381.
33. Sautman and Hairong (2007, pp.94-95).
34. Quoted in Jakobson (2009, p.425).

35. See, M. Fitzgerald, "China invests in Ethiopia but at what cost?" *Irish Time* [Online] 'China invests in Ethiopia but at what cost?' (Accessed January 27, 2011). <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/world/2010/0127/1224263206337.html> (Accessed January 29, 2011).
36. For useful discussion about the circumstances under which China's attraction may be eroded, see, Kurlantzick (2007, pp. 226-235); for one perspective on China's soft power in Africa in general, see, Kurlantzick (2009, pp.165-183).
37. That Africa in China is a hot topic, which is also in the public interest in the West, is betrayed by the fact that we have seen arguably the first novel on the subject in the English language, Larry Andrews' (2010) *The China-Africa Parallax*. Furthermore, some of the depiction of China in this novel reads as though it was taken from such overtly Sino-pessimistic books as Michel and Beuret's *China Safari* (2010).
38. Guerero and Manji (2008, pp.1-2).
39. UNCTAD. *Economic Development in Africa. Report 2010 South-South Cooperation: Africa and the New Forms of Development Partnership*. New York and Geneva, 2010, p. 86.
40. Ibid; also, see, C. Alden, D. Large and R. S. de Oliveira "China Returns to Africa: Anatomy of an Expansive Engagement," Documento de Trabajo. Real Instituto Elcano Working Paper 51/2008. <http://www.realinstitutoalcano.com> (Accessed June 12, 2009).
41. We should note, however, that China did become Africa's top trading partner for the first time in 2009, and, in aggregate China's FDI in Africa did grow to \$9.3 billion also in 2009. According to a Chinese diplomatic source China's FDI in Africa in 2009 was about \$US 8 billion. Ambassador Liu Gujin, Special Representative for African Affairs at the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, speech delivered at China-Ethiopia and China-Africa relations. Available at <http://et.china-embassy.org/eng/zagx/t772346.htm> (Accessed January 18, 2011). Between 2000 and 2010 trade between China and Latin America grew faster than China's trade with Africa. See, Mauricio Cardenas, "China's Influence in Latin America," Brookings Institution and the Council of the Americas, August 17, 2011. Broadcast live on C-Span 3. Also, see, UNCTAD, *Economic Development in Africa. Report 2010 South-South Cooperation: Africa and the New Forms of Development Partnership*. New York and Geneva, 2010, p. 30.
42. Ibid.
43. Andrew Malone, "How China's Taking Over Africa," *Daily Mail*, July 18, 2008.
44. The U.S. House Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee Hearing on China, January 19, 2011. (Carried on C-Span, January 20, 2011).

45. Taylor (2009, p.11).

46. Speech available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/06/166028.htm> (Accessed July 14, 2011). It should be pointed out that former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, too, did say the same thing a few years earlier. See, endnote number 26 above.

47. Brautigam (2009).

48. *The Ethiopian Herald*, November 2, 2004.

49. *The Ethiopian Herald*, December 23, 2008.

50. Campbell (2008, p.100).

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