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Adaptation and Learning among Chinese Actors in Africa

Karsten GIESE

When we talk about “China in Africa”, we should always remember to differentiate between the various actors and scales that are too often conflated and hidden behind such large and all-encompassing labels like “China” or “Africa”. Common containers and the homogenizing of diversity seldom help to broaden our knowledge or deepen our understanding of the various phenomena which can be observed at the various scales of the multiple relationships that have evolved between this East Asian country and the African continent. Moreover, it is necessary to specify the point in time or particular period we are covering in our scholarly work and that from which we draw our conclusions. Quite a few of the publications addressing China–Africa relations have succumbed to broad generalizations, neglected diversity and specificity and overlooked the temporal dimension. The last couple of years, however, have seen the emergence of a growing body of well-informed case studies on the Chinese presence across the African continent that stress the particularity and the situatedness of Chinese–African encounters and interactions in Africa. We now can rely on thick descriptions of various Chinese actors’ realities on the ground in Africa that more often than not defy and counter longstanding and still very common stereotypes, such as that of China’s grand strategy in the scramble for Africa or of the generally exploitative and belligerent character of Chinese economic endeavours across the African continent.

The collection of articles in this issue reflects the efforts of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* to serve as platform for original research within the emerging field of China–Africa studies. The articles presented here are closely linked to those published one year ago in issue 1/2014 and, together, the two issues represent the current state of this still-new area of empirical research. The contributions of the earlier collection clearly showed that in many ways the activities and practices of Chinese entrepreneurs in Africa do not differ from those of other local and foreign actors, that they usually benefit local populations or at least certain groups and strata thereof, and that relation-

ships of cooperation and conviviality have developed despite widespread mutual distrust.

The authors of the pieces in this issue, although not explicitly addressing the temporal dimension of the relationships between Chinese and African actors, focus on evolutionary processes of different scales and the various ways in which adaptation and learning processes unfold over time. In various ways, this issue counters the widespread perception that the Chinese populations that have relocated to various places across the African continent over the last 15 or so years are incapable of or unwilling to adapt to and integrate into their African host societies. Learning processes of Chinese actors at various scales – from individual enterprise to nation-states – is the overarching theme tackled by the authors who have contributed to this topical issue of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*.

In her contribution, Katy Lam discusses groups of Chinese who have entered the African continent with long-term economic perspectives, which differentiates them from the large majority of Chinese traders who are ready to withdraw from their markets once sales and profits become unsatisfactory. Lam's work focuses on investors and introduces us to their efforts to adapt their strategies and practices to the local conditions of Ghana. By comparing entrepreneurs who are newly arrived with those who are established, she is able to demonstrate how Chinese businesspeople have been strategically engaging in relationships with a large variety of host-country institutional actors, business partners and employees, as well as with fellow Chinese, in order to build up and maintain localized social capital to the benefit of their economic interests. She also demonstrates that rising numbers of Chinese businesspeople in Ghana do not translate into ethnic community-building, solidarity or improved social status. Quite to the contrary, her paper reveals the gaps between newcomers and established actors when the latter distance themselves from the former for their "bad manners" and "poor quality", which they regard as the main cause of the unfavourable image of "the Chinese" in Africa and the resulting negative impact on their businesses. Newly arrived Chinese entrepreneurs, however, attribute their own economic difficulties to structural factors of the host country – namely, deficiencies of local institutions and populations. Lam thus demonstrates that the level of adaptation to the host country, the degree of integration and the ability to build up localized social capital strongly influ-

ences Chinese investors' perceptions of their host society. She also provides empirical evidence that – despite allegations to the contrary – Chinese are able and willing to adapt to and integrate into their African host societies for the benefit of their own economic endeavours and that the temporal dimension is of great importance for analysing Chinese–African interactions on the ground in Africa.

Romain Dittgen, in the issue's second article, also compares the practices of different Chinese groups and applies a geographical lens and spatial perspective to the analysis of Chinese practices in Africa. He is interested in the spatial forms and dynamics that have evolved and unfolded as the people behind two distinct economic pursuits – a state-owned Chinese oil firm in Chad versus commercial malls with private Chinese investors in Johannesburg, South Africa – have engaged with their host environments. Oil exploration is usually seen as an ideal type example of an economic activity that is cut off from the external social environment, whereas shopping malls and commercial centres, though also operating within clear-cut spatial enclosures, build on active and intense links with the social environment as embodied by customers. In his spatial analysis, Dittgen draws on the two theoretical concepts of liminality and heterotopias and examines the particular spatial practices that he interprets as products of a dynamic tension – inherent to the economic activities of the two Chinese entities under discussion – between a closing-off against and an opening up towards the host society in terms of level of interaction. Although the actors, economic fields and business models differ greatly between the two cases, each evinces the creation of a particular ambivalence between protecting an enclave and seeking active linkages with the local environment, caused by both purely spatial practices and economic strategies. Dittgen also stresses the importance of the temporal dimension and the process of adaptation and learning for the presence of Chinese economic actors in Africa. He emphasizes the transitional period of learning between launching the business and consolidating a local foothold, during which each of the two Chinese economic entities – different as they are – shows signs of behavioural change and adaptation regarding their businesses and their spatial practices.

Nigeria can be regarded as the African country with the broadest relationship with China, at least in numerical terms with regard to the number of Nigerians who have moved to China and the number of

Chinese who have chosen to undertake economic activities within Nigeria. Nigerians in Guangzhou, for instance, form the largest African community within Chinese territory. Similarly, Nigeria has attracted the largest number of Chinese entrepreneurs of any African state, although the country is regarded as highly problematic in terms of business environment and personal safety. Probably no other African country is so well represented within Chinese cyberspace. Internet forums provide business information, personal accounts of experiences in the country and advice on questions of everyday living, among other topics. Allen Hai Xiao, in his contribution to this issue, concentrates on the social realities of Chinese petty entrepreneurs, who as transnational practitioners of globalization from below face the various adversities inherent to the informality in which they operate. Xiao analyses the strategies these entrepreneurs employ to cope with what he frames as everyday corruption by both state representatives and ordinary people. Drawing on a wealth of qualitative data collected through intense participant observation, the author describes the particular situation of individual vulnerability, which is in part influenced by variations in state policies on the Nigerian side and changing bilateral relations between China and Nigeria. For Xiao, informality is the key to understanding both the vulnerabilities and the counterstrategies of the informants of his ethnographic study. The author also finds strong indicators here for processes of adaptation to local conditions, although quite different from the processes discussed in the previous two articles. Presenting in-depth insights into the ways some Chinese entrepreneurs have made the provision of visas and permits to their fellow countrymen a business model that builds upon developing close links with corrupt host country officials, the author argues that this form of documentation services, in the absence of official channels, epitomizes the informal character of the economic endeavours of many Chinese in Nigeria. This adaptation, along with the lack of cohesion and solidarity among the Chinese themselves, he further argues, results in self-interested individual practices and behaviours and the strong tendency to strategize every social interaction with both Nigerians and fellow Chinese. Only through actively participating in and exchanging vital information via online forums, Xiao concludes, are the Chinese petty entrepreneurs in Nigeria able to develop a sense of community and strategies to cope with macro-level political fluctuations that adversely affect them.

By contrast, in the next two articles we leave behind the micro level of the Chinese presence within various countries of the African continent and focus instead on international relations, as PRC and Taiwanese policies towards and diplomatic relations with the continent take centre stage. Richard Aidoo and Steve Hess highlight the Chinese self-proclaimed principle of non-interference, which has been well received across the African continent as an alternative to European and North American political principles in dealing with the Global South. Countering the Washington Consensus and related policies of conditional assistance, the Chinese stance on non-interference has been continuously criticized by Western states as opportunistic, serving Chinese self-interests and being an instrument for facilitating China's access to African resources and markets. In their article, Aidoo and Hess analyse and contrast the inconsistencies of Chinese policies towards Africa with the unchanged rhetoric of non-interference. They argue that deviations from the rhetoric in practical foreign relations with African countries should not simply be uncritically mistaken for inconsistency and opportunistic behaviour. On the contrary, they conclude that these observable deviations from official Chinese IR rhetoric should, rather, be interpreted as a learning process. "Non-interference 2.0", as the authors call it, is characterized by the growing sophistication of Chinese foreign policy makers who have demonstrated their ability to react to the changes that have taken place across the African continent since the early 2000s and to address the increasingly diversified political and economic landscape of Africa in varied and contextualized ways.

In the last contribution to this issue within the topical framework of Chinese–African relations, Timothy S. Rich and Vasabjit Banerjee focus on the development of diplomatic relations between various African countries and Taiwan. Based on qualitative and quantitative data, and coming from a long-term perspective, the authors demonstrate that Taiwan's diplomatic ties with African countries actually benefitted from the international setting and political rationales of the Cold War period. The authors further argue that since the end of the Cold War, de-ideologized economic interests rather than ideological struggles have become the decisive factor of Taiwan's striving for diplomatic recognition in Africa. Economic interests, Rich and Banerjee conclude, have incentivized most African states to establish or maintain diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.

The victory of economic rationales, intertwined with China's economic rise and corresponding appeal to the leaders and populations of nations across Africa, has made Taiwan's diplomatic relations with the continent ever more precarious; Taiwan's prospects do not appear promising.

The current issue forms the second part of a large body of new scholarship on Chinese–African interactions on the ground across Africa as well as in China, of which the first part was presented by the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* in issue 1/2014, titled “Understanding Chinese–African Interactions in Africa”. While these first two issues of a three-part series put the spotlight on the Chinese presence in Africa, the third and last issue, scheduled for publication by the end of 2015, will concentrate on the social realities of Africans as distinct “others” within urban Chinese society. The *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* has been a venue for the emerging scholarship on Sino-African relations since 2008, when the first topical issue, titled “China in Africa: Who Benefits?”, was published. In addition to a second topical issue, “China’s Evolving Africa Policy: The Limits of Socialization” (4/2011), which had a strong focus on interstate relations, the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* has tracked the development of this field by publishing research articles within various topical frameworks, such as Mathews and Yang’s account of African actors in South China as stakeholders of “globalization from below” (2/2012), Hackenesch’s comparison of China’s and the EU’s donor strategies vis-à-vis Ethiopia (1/2013) and Alves’ comparative study of China’s oil-backed loans to Angola and Brazil (1/2013). Since the full content of the *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* has been freely available online since 2009, readers can find these contributions from back issues in the journal’s archive at <www.CurrentChineseAffairs.org>.

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Contents

The Chinese Presence in Africa: A Learning Process

Introduction

- **Karsten GIESE**
**Adaptation and Learning among Chinese Actors
in Africa** 3

Research Articles

- Katy N. LAM
Chinese Adaptations: African Agency, Fragmented Community and Social Capital Creation in Ghana 9
- Romain DITTGEN
Of Other Spaces? Hybrid Forms of Chinese Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa 43
- Allen Hai XIAO
In the Shadow of the States: The Informalities of Chinese Petty Entrepreneurship in Nigeria 75
- Richard AIDOO and Steve HESS
Non-Interference 2.0: China's Evolving Foreign Policy towards a Changing Africa 107
- Timothy S. RICH and Vasabjit BANERJEE
Running Out of Time? The Evolution of Taiwan's Relations in Africa 141

Research Article

- Meiqin WANG
Invisible Body and the Predicaments of Existence in an Urbanizing China 163

Contributors	199
Article Index 2014	201