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The Chinese Dream: China-Africa Educational Exchanges

Kaian Lam

ABSTRACT

Over the decades, the People's Republic of China has rapidly expanded its educational investments and experiments in Africa. It has increased exponentially the number of scholarships for African students to cross oceans to attend Chinese universities. Also, specialized programmes continue to be designed specifically to attract African candidates. Meanwhile, groups of Chinese teachers and technicians are dispatched to Africa to educate and train people on the ground. In individual African countries, Chinese professionals are integrated in local schools, participating in social, cultural and educational activities. In many cases, the Chinese dream has become a viable alternative to American colleges or European universities, in terms of social prestige, practicality and future prospects. Questions can be asked about the plausible explanations for such massive Chinese educational investments. It will also be worth knowing the main decision-makers, participants and beneficiaries, the impact on African societies, on China-Africa relations and on international politics, etc. This discussion is part of the more general debate on African human resources education and training. It sees Africa as a dynamic, democratic and vast arena where diverse education models compete for legitimacy, popularity and sustainability. Chinese education is emerging as a strong proponent.

RESUMO

Ao longo das décadas, a República Popular da China expandiu rapidamente os seus investimentos e experimentações na área de educação em África. Aumentou exponencialmente o número de bolsas destinadas aos estudantes africanos para que estes pudessem ir longe e frequentar universidades chinesas. Além disso, cursos especializados específicos continuam a ser concebidos a fim de atrair

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candidatos africanos. Entretanto, equipas de professores e técnicos chineses deslocam-se para África para formar e treinar pessoas no terreno. Em certos países africanos, os profissionais chineses estão integrados em escolas locais, participando em atividades sociais, culturais e educativas. Em muitos casos, o sonho chinês tornou-se uma alternativa viável aos colégios americanos ou universidades europeias em termos de prestígio social, utilidade e oportunidades futuras. Pedimos as explicações plausíveis para os investimentos educativos chineses tão maciços. Procuramos identificar os responsáveis pelas decisões, os participantes e beneficiários, o impacto sobre as sociedades africanas e sobre a relação China-África e política internacional, etc. A presente discussão integra o debate geral e maior em torno da formação dos recursos humanos africanos. Para os nossos propósitos, África é vista como uma arena dinâmica, democrática e vasta na qual diversos modelos educativos concorrem pela legitimidade, apoio popular e sustentabilidade. A educação chinesa está a impor-se como um proponente forte.

INTRODUCTION: SOME MYTHS ABOUT THE DRAGON

Sino-African relations is a significant area of study that has attracted the attention of scholars from all over the world. However, it is still a field to be defined academically. The following provides one of the earliest and most memorable descriptions of Chinese engagements in Africa:

Our research leads us to conclude that studying China in Africa is much like pursuing a dragon in the bush. The dragon is dense, so that while one is always conscious of the animal's presence, visible or not, observation becomes difficult. (Yu, 1968, pp. 1025-1026)

At the time of writing, Chinese foreign actions in East Africa, namely Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, attracted a lot of attention. Yu was of the opinion that China operated on “unfamiliar terrain” and had yet to familiarize itself with “the new environment”, referring to the African continent.

This “dragon in the bush” approach to the study of China-Africa relations revealed how confused researchers felt about their subject of study, and the language used to describe their confusion was similar to that of disorder, disorganization and doubt. It received criticisms for different reasons. According to one view:

Within the Western academy... the study of China-Africa relations is probably too formal a description of what has proceeded hitherto in a rather *ad hoc*, limited fashion, especially since the 1960s. It has

been – and largely remains – disadvantaged by the longstanding divide between research on African and Chinese politics and foreign relations. This has produced a persisting symmetrical neglect: like China's relations with Latin America or the Middle East – studied yet comparatively marginalized in the literature – Africa has never been a mainstream subject in the study of Chinese foreign relations (Large, 2008, p. 46).

Furthermore, the author was highly critical of the inefficiency of western research on the subject. He highlighted areas for improvement, such as the heavy reliance on English information sources and the lack of multilingual researchers on the field. He also observed that almost all research attention was focused on Chinese extractive activities and on the rationales and actions of the state elites.

The mythical dragon is a well-recognized symbol of Chinese culture. *Baidu baike*, the Chinese version of *Wikipedia*, says:

The dragon is a totem of all Chinese ethnicities, a symbol of Chinese culture. Our ancestors considered it to possess unrestrained power. It is a godly entity related to the water god, and it determines, directs, controls and manages beasts and meteorological phenomena. It was from then that the Chinese began to worship the dragon, understanding it as an incomprehensible natural power. This was also the start of a blurred integration; through thousands of years of prosperous historical progress, the dragon has become a culture, the embodiment of the immensely rich historical heritage of all Chinese ethnicities.¹

Meanwhile, in media outlets, the dragon analogy is commonly used to refer to Chinese presence in Africa, signalling caution or even suspicion. Western media, in particular, is very distrustful of Chinese intentions, imagining a heavy-weight red-golden millennial dragon looming over the world and over Africa. With ceaseless nourishment of negative comments, China-Africa relations is circumscribed and framed, so that it is popularly judged to be little more than rhetoric for faceless neo-colonialism.

Compare the following international headlines and commentaries:

“How China is feeding off poor Africa”²

“Le dragon chinois et l'éléphant africain: vers un partenariat gag-

¹ Chinese dragon culture [my trad.]. (n.d.). In *Baidu baike*. Retrieved from <https://baike.baidu.com>

² Michira, M., & Frankline, S. (2018, September 13). How China is feeding off poor Africa. *Standard Digital*. Retrieved from <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke>

nant-gagnant”³ [The Chinese dragon and the African elephant: towards a win-win partnership]

“Forum Chine-Afrique: le dragon et l'autruche”⁴ [China-Africa Forum: the dragon and the ostrich]

“China-Afrika-Gipfel: der rote drache greift nach Afrika”⁵ [China-Africa Summit: the red dragon reaches Africa]

In fact, much commotion was caused by the 2018 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, which took place from September 3-4 in Beijing.⁶

If we pay closer attention to this lop-sided view of current international politics, an important party is missing. Rarely does African agency feature in the debate. Individuals are sometimes interviewed, but their comments are limited to agreeing or not agreeing with the dealings of the Chinese. Little care is taken to understand how they leverage Chinese projects, how agreement terms are negotiated, or any other meaningful experiences or processes. It is taken for granted that China heads out to take control of the resource-rich continent and the inhabitants on it are desperate.

EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES IN CHINA-AFRICA RELATIONS

If research on China-Africa relations is “green”, the study of non-economic ventures is less developed still. For instance, reading the prominent McKinsey report titled *Dance of the Lions and Dragons: How are Africa and China Engaging, and How Will the Partnership Evolve?* (Sun, Jayaram, & Kassiri, 2017), there is no mention of education, only technical and vocation training and a suggestion of management training, almost strictly limited to economic engagement, i.e., China businesses in Africa.

With the above discussion in mind, this paper is limited in scope and discusses only some aspects of China-Africa educational exchanges. It is not intended to justify and offer excuses for Chinese actions. Neither is it meant to fight back at the West for being harsh and mean. No country is entirely consistent in its approaches. This is true of all countries, including China. There are trials and errors. Time changes, partners change, and policies change. These developments, not age-

3 Taje, M. (2018, November 9). Le dragon chinois et l'éléphant africain: vers un partenariat gagnant-gagnant. *Business News*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessnews.com.tn>

4 von Garnier, G. (2016, January 13). Forum Chine-Afrique: le dragon et l'autruche. *Le Temps*. Retrieved from <https://www.letemps.ch>

5 China-Afrika-Gipfel: der rote drache greift nach Afrika. (2018, September 4). *Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen*. Retrieved from <https://www.srf.ch/>

6 For more information, visit the official site (<https://focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/>).

old stereotypes, are of interest to a researcher. Over the decades, China has rapidly expanded its educational investments and experiments in Africa. It has increased exponentially the number of scholarships for African students to cross oceans to attend Chinese universities. Also, specialized programmes continue to be designed specifically to attract African candidates. Meanwhile, groups of Chinese teachers and technicians are dispatched to Africa to educate and train people on the ground. In individual African countries, Chinese professionals are integrated in local schools, participating in social, cultural and educational activities. In many cases, the Chinese dream has become a viable alternative to American colleges or European universities, in terms of social prestige, practicality and future prospects. Questions can be asked about the plausible explanations for such massive Chinese educational investments. It will also be worth knowing the main decision-makers, participants and beneficiaries, the impact on African societies, on China-Africa relations and on international politics, etc. This discussion is part of the more general debate on African human resources education and training. It sees Africa as a dynamic, democratic and vast arena where diverse education models compete for legitimacy, popularity and sustainability. Chinese education is emerging as a strong proponent.

My interest in this theme started with reading an article on why African students are choosing to study in China⁷ which was then republished in the form of a news report in *Quartz*.⁸ The statistics are impressive. The main conclusion is that, globally, China is the second country that attracts the greatest number of African students, just after France, and more than the United States and United Kingdom combined. However, what also strikes as an important detail is how translation is the cause for the alarm. As the authors explained, the data was available for a long time. As it was in Chinese and not understood by many, it remained undigested. When the Michigan State University translated the information, the bells rang, and the Americans were alerted. The American news then travelled back to China, in Chinese translation, and was received rather positively or at least with curiosity.⁹ Some months later, there was a similar *Le Monde* report on the “*diplomatie douce*” of China that was widely cited in Chinese media.¹⁰

7 Breeze, V., & Moore, N. (2017, June 27). China tops US and UK as destination for anglophone African students. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/uk/>

8 Breeze, V., & Moore, N. (2017, June 30). China has overtaken the US and UK as the top destination for anglophone African students. *Quartz*. Retrieved from <https://qz.com>

9 American media claims China surpasses US and UK to become African students' major foreign study destination: evidence of Chinese soft power [my trad.]. (2017, July 2). *Cankaoxiaoxi*. Retrieved from <http://www.cankaoxiaoxi.com>

10 Le Belzic, S. (2017, September 18.) La Chine, nouvelle destination phare des étudiants africains. *Le Monde*. Retrieved from <https://www.lemonde.fr>

After this first encouragement to investigate further, it is felt that there is a need to look at more Chinese sources¹¹, compare mediatic and scholarly interpretations, and introduce some theoretical and conceptual threads to the analysis. Importantly, Chinese educational efforts in Africa cannot be isolated from the broader China-Africa relations. The former is a part of the latter. Education is the social and cultural component of the diplomatic and economic project. With regards to the modern, post-colonial period, China construes Africa as a unity. It sees poverty as the principal cause of the common woes. It speaks from the position of a developing country to fellow developing countries. What divides the table, though, are the perceived intentions of this out-reach. The West tends to see this as no different from, or worse than, their old selves. Meanwhile, the most recent Chinese explanations highlight mutual benefits and learning.

Learning, training and education are difficult to define. It is more so when official categorizations change. Checking the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation site, China-Africa Relations is divided into Political Exchanges, Economic Cooperation, Cultural Exchanges, and Peace and Security.¹² Most of what is relevant for this discussion is found in the Cultural Exchanges section. Confused as some foreigners may be, the Chinese do not claim to know all about Africa. Admittedly, African Studies in China is young. Note the following frank account – first of its kind to be published in the prestigious journal *African Studies Review* – by a Chinese Africanist:

African Studies are concentrated in big cities... Most of the books written by Chinese scholars are based on secondary materials from English sources. Few scholars have been to Africa to teach or conduct research. Not a single anthropologist has been to Africa specifically for study, and thus no serious ethnographic study of African people, or any study on the oral tradition, has been produced... There is no African language study in China except for training purposes (Li, 2005, pp. 73-74).

However, almost a decade and a half has passed since Li made his observations. African Studies is growing by the day¹³, and it will not simply be a copycat of the Anglophone or Francophone research traditions.

11 Besides the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, major Chinese sources include: China Association for International Education (www.cafsa.org.cn), Belt and Road Portal (<https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn>), China-Africa Trade Research Centre (news.afrindex.com) and Xinhua News (www.cafsa.org.cn).

12 For more information, visit the official site (<https://focacsummit.mfa.gov.cn/eng/>).

13 For more information on the current activities of two major African research bases in China, visit the Center for African Studies of Peking University (<http://caspu.pku.edu.cn/>) and the Institute of African Studies of Zhejiang Normal University (<http://ias.zjnu.cn/main.htm>).

In yet another proposal by a well-known Chinese Africanist, it is said that African Studies done by Chinese scholars should be broader in scope and more explicit in their practical contributions:

Besides borrowing the West's case studies and field work expertise, contemporary African Studies in China should also continue the Chinese academic tradition of conducting comprehensive surveys, of promoting the greatest possible nature-human realization, and of understanding modern changes and predicting future paths from history. For that, Africa presents a most confusing case; but if we identify correctly the fundamental problem faced by the entire continent, are able to say for certain what the road ahead is, set our strategic priorities, and not lose sight of the big picture, we, based on a sound understanding of historical precedents, gain assurance that we know Africa and its future (Liu, 2012, p. 25, my translation).

On top of scientific rigour, national researchers are repeatedly urged to look at common African challenges and goals, identify unique Chinese and African linkages and produce results to better and to predict the future for both while promoting China-Africa relations.

If African Studies is so, educational cooperation cannot be a basket of isolated aid measures. To be fair, the aid discourse has been abandoned by China for quite a while already. Education is not charity, but an integrated part of the two-way flows of resources, ideas and sentiments. It is supposed to help Africa in its efforts to alleviate poverty and, certainly, to meet international standards and a series of development and sustainability goals. China does cooperate with other organizations and contribute to very diverse social and cultural multi-party collaboration projects. This is often neglected by the West when judgements are passed hastily. Then, what is obvious in some of the select training programmes promoted by China in Africa is that they are central to Chinese expertise. Dealing with food insecurity, approaching rural farmers, introducing new breeds and offering technical and technological support are considered Chinese strengths. Be it granted that China is historically proven to be competent in agricultural reforms and innovations. Specialists are plenty and the materials for training are available. The willingness to share its past experiences is enormous. China finds its audience in the heart of Africa.

To take an example, King (2013) has conducted grounded surveys of Chinese engagements with Africa in the education sector, looking at specific China-Africa educational exchange programmes and gauging the enthusiasm of multiple parties. In a separate article, he stated that it has not be a priority on China's part to present the whole compass of its activities in this respect (King, 2014). Instead, what is disseminated is a skilful national compilation of data, action plans and forecasts coming

from offices, ministries and commissions tasked in one way or another with China-Africa cooperation. King gives abundant examples of the types of Chinese educational investments and gestures of goodwill that we find across the continent. They are much more than just state-controlled Confucius Institutes and lonely language teachers repeating one curriculum. Classes and actual operations are much more dynamic and responsive to environmental factors than we think. In comparison with western approaches, the Chinese alternative has the following characteristics:

In the human resource development domain, however, one of the principal difficulties in performing policy learning is that the Chinese do not openly discuss options for the allocation and use of educational aid. An accessible account of the trade-offs of investing in basic education versus secondary or higher, as has been produced in the West for decades, does not exist. As we said at the outset, China does not articulate an aid policy for the education sector of the kind that has been widespread in the West for 50 years. The importance of this point cannot be understated. As education cooperation is seen as just one among several vectors contributing to development, it is not perceived as a stand-alone sector (King, 2014, p. 56).

The author pays particular attention to the tertiary education sector. In reality, Chinese interventions in African higher education is perhaps what draws the most western attention. Although a great percentage of African scholars are self-funded, their movements to China are magnetic and massive. As the number of Chinese scholarships rise by folds, more Africans will decide to leave to attend degree or non-degree courses, not only in the arts and humanities, but also in science, engineering and technology. This will in turn propel the internationalization of Chinese higher education and influence the organization of courses that are popular among foreign students.

While the West has considered primary and basic education key to African development, they seem to have neglected universities. The Africans themselves aspire for more and the Chinese tap into this, appreciating African ambitions. Here is the transcript of an interview with Stephen Chan, a prominent western Africanist and a member of the Chinese diaspora, based in London, introducing his book *The Morality of China in Africa: The Middle Kingdom and the Dark Continent* published in 2013:

The Chinese are very good at picking up what people want... What the Chinese are also doing these days is building infrastructure along the line of rail or along the motorway. So they are putting in schools, they are putting in clinics, they are putting in hospitals. Now this is something the West hasn't really got appreciation of. The Chinese are prepared to build entire universities along the line of rail or along the

line of road. We [westerners] have this very limited ethos in western development assistance that, yeah, education is important, let's build these guys some primary schools, as if what they need is some basic literacy. The Chinese, because they came out of deprivation themselves, just very very recently, and a very great deal of the countryside are still within deprivation, the Chinese understand something which you do not need to knock too hard to find in Africa, and that is the power of aspiration. Actually, you don't want your kids to just stop at primary school, you want them to go on to secondary school, you want them to go on to university. This is a natural desire and is an aspiration for a future which is better and an aspiration for a future which is educated. I think the Chinese has gotten on to that very very well indeed. So they are prepared to go the whole hog, not put a glass ceiling as if you come up so far, you can't come up any further ("The Morality of China in Africa", 2013).

As such, entire universities are built on the continent to respond to African parents' aspirations for their children. China, or at least officials and operators on the ground, feel a big brother moral obligation towards their younger siblings, adopting Confucius principles (Chan, 2013). It is not rare to read interviews conducted for different purposes in different reports in which Chinese representatives speak with conviction on the topic. While these relationships are not based on equality, they are structured effectively on reciprocities, doing and returning of favours, and abiding by one's duties in their respective positions. Accordingly, such are the moral yardsticks that, in principle, permeate China-Africa educational exchanges.

Chan's words should be understood in African context. The few African universities that are considered world-class are concentrated in South Africa and a few other Anglophone countries. Almost invariably, they follow the western spirit and tail the western research and teaching traditions. The best professors of these universities receive their highest academic degree in a foreign university, be it American, English or French. This dependence and colonial *malaise* have been severely criticized by African scholars, who believe that an engaged public, consisting of scholar and non-scholars, has yet to gather and work together "to value the marginalized humanity and the creative diversity of being African" (Nyamnjoh, 2012, p. 20). In these settings, African universities are not free-thinking. The students they train are forever inferior. Popular epistemologies are constantly suppressed and degraded. Africans grow up speaking a foreign language, thinking in other people's words, and denying their own cultures and histories. Universities like these are best at training westerners, not Africans themselves. Such is the colonial educational legacy that certain African scholars warn against. Meanwhile, the Chinese are joining in great strides, first with infrastructure, research

centres and laboratories, then equipment, and Chinese and other books. They have no historical baggage but great courage to experiment and to err. Inter-university exchanges, of humans and resources, are also taking place. Universities are good partners in other educational efforts and will in turn contribute to running and furnishing local and national primary and secondary schools. There are reasons to believe that the Chinese wish for functional universities, not phantom houses.

Times Higher Education, widely known for its rankings of world universities, published the following opinion by a South Sudanese professor:

“[W]hile Africa’s 20th-century intellectual giants were largely educated in the West, the 21st century’s Cheikh Anta Diops (Sorbonne), Wole Soyinkas (Leeds), V. S. Naipauls (Oxford), Ali Mazruis (Manchester and Oxford) and Léopold Sédar Senghors (Sorbonne) will emerge from Chinese universities.”¹⁴

I am afraid of being too optimistic or too apologetic. Having said this, more help is always welcome, especially when it is thought out for the long term. Education is central to public welfare and social development and, hopefully, leads to economic growth and national strength. In treating Africa as the next international frontier (Liu, 2012), China is speeding ahead with great stamina and determination. Most people are prepared to hear some bad news here and there. Some Chinese projects will fall apart, and others will not deliver results. Last but not the least, we need to give voice to the students, teachers, trainers, trainees, young scholars and professors on the move, be it locally, regionally, nationally or transnationally. For instance, feedback from African students in China are valuable (Bodamo, 2011). We also need to hear the local actors on the ground, hence the importance of fieldwork. All of them participate in China-Africa educational exchanges.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: MORE ON THE DRAGON

Of all the mythical abilities that the Chinese dragon is thought to possess, there is general consensus on its propensity to threaten, punish and correct, but little or nothing is said about teaching or educating *per se*. Compare this with how one author summarizes the worthiness of the dragon in her book:

At the end of the day, we should remember this: China’s own experiments have raised hundreds of millions of Chinese out of poverty, largely without foreign aid. They believe in investment, trade, and technology as levers for development, and they are applying these same tools in their African engagement, not out of altruism but be-

¹⁴ Kuyok, A. K. (2018, August 9). China is becoming African students’ destination du jour [opinion]. *Times Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.timeshighereducation.com>

cause of what they learned at home. They learned that their own natural resources could be assets for modernization and prosperity. They learned that a central government commitment to capitalist business development could rapidly reduce poverty. They learned that special zones could attract clusters of mature industries from the West and Japan, providing jobs and technologies. These lessons emphasize not aid, but experiments; not paternalism, but the “creative destruction” of competition and the green shoots of new opportunities. This may be the dragon's ultimate, ambiguous gift (Deborah, 2009, pp. 311-312).

The image of the Chinese dragon “gifting” is also novel. Then, it remains to be seen if international education is among one of the “gifts” from the dragon.

To conclude, there is a need for more balanced, historically-situated and theoretically-informed understandings about China-African relations. Contrary to what some scholars argue, China has always engaged with Africa, and it was *ideological* commitment not *economic* interests that first brought Chinese and Africans together (Li, 2005, emphases added). For the present, it would be interesting to see if there are also *cultural* motives for furthering transcontinental contacts, namely in the form of educational exchanges.

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