

**Conference Report:
'A 'Chinese Scramble'? The Politics of Contemporary China-Africa Relations',
Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge 12-13 July 2006**

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China's expanding relations with Africa became prominent during 2006, or China's 'Year of Africa'. This conference coincided with unprecedented media coverage of 'China in Africa'. Prompted in part by the recent visibility of the subject after high-level Chinese tours of the continent, such attention is not unlike the wave of interest that followed Zhou En Lai's African safari in 1963-64, but is occurring in very different circumstances.

The overarching aim of this conference was to deepen and broaden analysis of 'China in Africa' beyond current media-driven preoccupations with a 'Chinese scramble' or variations on the familiar theme of the 'China threat' in the African context. It also aimed to bridge the prevailing academic divide between researchers working on Africa and China. Exchange between these broad and eclectic communities has generally been limited to date and this is evident in certain quarters; much of the analysis by 'Africanists' betrays an understandable lack of familiarity with the Chinese context, and vice versa.

The conference was convened by Daniel Large (Sudan Open Archive and SOAS), Chris Alden (LSE) and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira (Cambridge). It attracted a wide variety of speakers and participants from Europe, China, America and different African countries including Sudan and was made possible by funding from the Rift Valley Institute, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office Research Analysts Department and Mills and Reeve.

The opening panel explored different perspectives on China in Africa. Chin Hao-Huang (CSIS) presented the view from Washington and outlined America's concerns; Adama Gaye offered a critical 'African Perspective', and He Wenping (Institute of West Asian and African Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) analyzed Beijing's African policy. The trade and political economy panel which followed saw Nicolas Pinaud (OECD) argue that despite an upturn in commodity demand in large part due to China, Africa's asymmetrical position in the world economy is reinforced rather than changed by Chinese economic engagement. Ricardo Soares de Oliveira examined the reasons for and nature of current Chinese oil engagement in Africa. He argued the cumulative impact of these comparative newcomers is to aggravate a much older political economy of oil extraction rather than constitute an exceptional case. It would thus be surprising if Chinese oil companies were willing and able to act in a manner that is qualitatively different and better from that of Western operators.

The next panel saw Ana Cristina Alves (Technical University of Lisbon) examine China's Lusophone economic diplomacy and Heidi Haugen (PRIO) present a detailed account of Chinese involvement in Cape Verde. In showing that this was a mostly positive 'success story', she demonstrated how detailed ethnographic study in 'small places' is enriching and, importantly, 'precludes sweeping conclusions about the impact of China's growing presence in Africa.' Manuel Ennes Ferreira (Technical University of Lisbon) explored the case of China's relations with Angola, concluding that the complexity of Angolan politics will mean that developing Chinese links will inevitably enter new, more political territory once the limits to the Chinese commitment to non-interference are tested and transgressed.

Providing an antidote to general thematic coverage, the day's final panel saw Jamie Monson (Carlton College) present her oral history work on the Tazara railway. She argued that the thrust of

China's approach was anti-hegemonic and linked this key Chinese aid project from a more ideologically committed period to the present day, thus underlining the value of historical background to contemporary discussion. Elisabeth Hsu (Oxford) gave an account of the anthropology of Chinese medicine in East Africa, where she brought out the diversity, mobility and interconnectedness of Chinese presence in east Africa as well as the shift to Chinese medicine as a business venture.

The second day began by addressing questions of China and development in Africa. Deborah Brautigam (American University), a pioneer of the study of Chinese aid in Africa, discussed 'Chinese Business and African Development' and argued that expanding Chinese business networks in sub-Saharan Africa can provide an important stimulus to local industrialisation. However, these are conditioned by context: Nigeria's difficult or indifferent policy environment imposes constraints, but the different conditions in Mauritius enable Chinese networks to contribute to export-oriented industrialisation success. After examining the official Chinese discourse on development in Africa, Daniel Large explored how China's reengagement is affecting the politics of African development. While confessing to unease at the prevailing consensus on the deleterious impact of Chinese involvement on governance, Denis Tull (German Institute for International Affairs and Security) nonetheless argued that the political consequences were unlikely to be progressive.

The second panel of case-studies saw Garth Shelton (Wits University) detail South Africa's relations with China, and offer a positive 'optimistic realist' case for Chinese engagement there. Daniel Large examined China's involvement in Sudan and Sharath Srinivasan (Oxford) presented the case of China's growing links with Nigeria. The concluding panel saw contrasting views aired on the question of China and African futures. The conference as a whole reached a consensus that the latest engagement by Chinese actors is more than ephemeral and that China matters in Africa. However, in arguing for the potentially transformative impact of Chinese and Asian actors more broadly in Africa, Chris Alden's presentation 'An Africa without Europeans' contrasted with Christopher Clapham's argument about the limits to what can be achieved by external intervention in Africa and that the return of China in Africa 'doesn't and can't fundamentally change it'. Such views remain to be tested. However, China's development and emergence on the world scene will likely mean that more than at any time in the past, including the 1960s, there are reasons to think that China's return to Africa will be lasting and consequential.

Papers will be published in an edited volume by Christopher Hurst in autumn 2007.

