



African Political Elites and the Making(s) of the China Model in Africa

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States in Africa are labeled “system ineffectual,” inconsequential to global politics, and lacking material and ideational capabilities to structure their foreign relations. The result is a portrayal of a passive Africa at the whims of its bilateral partners—be they China, the United States, or Russia. Contra this impolitic framing of Africa, this article explores how states in Africa are strategically shaping the norms of development paradigms promoted by foreign powers and influencing external actors to legitimize their preferred norms. Empirically focusing on China’s development model in Africa, the article examines how norms related to the model are being shaped and diffused; and how through the ingenuity of political elites, China is making the China model “on the go.” The main argument is that political elites in Africa are strategically reconstructing the China model, creating their own multifaceted versions that delicately balance their own domestic interests and their bilateral relations with China while deriving maximum benefits from the People’s Republic of China.

Keywords: China Model, People’s Republic of China, PRC, Development in Africa, Socialization, Norms, Agency, Development Paradigms, Regional Order, Political Elites.

Related Articles (in this Special Issue):

Duggan, Niall. 2020. “China—The Champion of the Developing World: A Study of China’s new Development Model and its Role in Changing Global Economic Governance.” *Politics & Policy* 48 (5).

Ganda, Willie D. 2020. “The China Model in Zimbabwe: The Belt and Road Initiative and Beyond.” *Politics & Policy* 48 (5).

Hodzi, Obert, and John H. S. Åberg. 2020. “Introduction to the Special Issue: Strategic Deployment of the China Model in Africa.” *Politics & Policy* 48 (5).

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank John H.S. Åberg and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on previous drafts of this article.

Politics & Policy, 0 (2020): 1-21. 10.1111/polp.12380

Published by Wiley Periodicals, LLC.

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Las élites políticas Africanas y la(s) hechura(s) del modelo de China en África

Los estados en África se consideran ‘sistémico-inefectivos’, inconsecuentes respecto a la política global y carentes de capacidades materiales e ideacionales para estructurar sus relaciones exteriores. El resultado es un retrato de una África pasiva a merced de los caprichos de sus socios bilaterales ya sea China, Estados Unidos o Rusia. Contra este enmarcamiento apolítico de África, este artículo explora cómo los estados en África están estratégicamente moldeando las normas de paradigmas de desarrollo promovidas por poderes exteriores que influyen sobre actores externos para legitimar sus normas preferidas. Nos enfocamos empíricamente en el modelo de desarrollo chino en África y examinamos cómo normas relacionadas con el modelo están siendo moldeadas y difundidas; y como a través de la ingenuidad de las elites políticas China va haciendo el modelo chino de poco a poco sin tener una versión definitiva. Nuestro principal argumento es que las elites políticas en África están reconstruyendo estratégicamente el modelo chino, creando sus propias versiones multifacéticas que delicadamente balancean sus intereses domésticos y sus relaciones con China al mismo tiempo que derivan beneficios máximos de la República Popular China.

Palabras Clave: Modelo Chino, Socialización, Normas, Agency, Regional orden, Elites políticas de África.

非洲政治精英与中国模式在非洲的建立

非洲国家被贴上“对国际体系没有影响力”（*system ineffectual*）、对全球政治无关紧要、缺少建构外交关系所需的物质能力与观念能力的标签。结果则刻画了一个被动接受其双边关系伙伴（不论是中国、美国还是俄罗斯）随心所欲指挥的非洲。与该不恰当的非洲刻画相反的是，本文探究了非洲各国如何从战略上影响由外国提倡的发展范式的规范，同时对外部行动者施加影响以对其所偏好的规范进行合法化。通过从实证上聚焦中国在非洲的发展模式，本文分析了与该模式相关的规范是如何形成和扩散的；以及中国如何通过其政治精英的能力让中国模式持续进行。主要论点则是，非洲的政治精英正从战略上重构中国模式，创造其各自的多面版本，谨慎平衡其国内利益与对中国的双边关系，同时从中华人民共和国处获取最大利益。

关键词: 中国模式, 社会化, 规范, 机构, 区域秩序, 政治精英.

Africa, unlike other regions of the world, has never in modern history had among its ranks countries that sought global dominance—or threatened the dominance of other global powers. In Wole Soyinka’s (2014, 25) words “politically, technologically, commercially, and in religion, Africa has never posed a hegemonic threat.” Instead, in its recent history, Africa is consistently

subjected to external subjugation: “its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside” because “foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for [Africa’s] development” (Nkrumah 1965, ix, x). This is partly because states in Africa are, as Robert Keohane (1969) puts it, “system ineffectual.” They “can do little to influence the system-wide forces that affect them, except in groups which are so large that each state has minimal influence and which may themselves be dominated by larger powers” (Keohane 1969, 296). As it stands, Africa remains under the dominance of other global powers. In concurrence, Christopher Alden (2010, 12) argues that “over the last fifteen years, emerging powers have made significant inroads into Western dominance in Africa.” What is unfolding is that former colonial powers that established the Westphalian state in Africa still maintain extensive influence in their former colonies—and with the emergence of rising powers like China, Africa has returned to being the “warring ground of the world’s traditional [and emerging] hegemonists” (Soyinka 2014, 25). Soyinka’s assertion of an Africa being fought over highlights perceptions, especially in the West, of passivity, impotency, and lack of agency in African states, and is reflected in statements by global leaders.

With the rise of non-Western emerging powers, development and governance models are the new frontiers of geopolitical competition between the West and China for influence in Africa. In a *New York Times* opinion, Kevin Rudd, the former Prime Minister of Australia opined,

as Western democracies look increasingly sick, other systems of governance are now on offer.... China has become increasingly confident of its own model, described as authoritarian or state capitalism. And its ‘Beijing Consensus’ is held up to the non-Western world as an example of a more effective form of national, and even international, governance. (Rudd 2018)

Rudd portrays the non-Western world as looking up to other powers for inspiration and examples, rather than as competitive states that can mold their own models of development. The implication is that these non-Western regions, majorly Africa, are objects of competition between the West and China. John Bolton, Donald Trump’s former National Security Advisor highlights the nature of that global competition over Africa: “Great powers, namely China and Russia, are rapidly expanding their financial and political influence in Africa. They are deliberately and aggressively targeting their investments in the region [Africa] to gain a competitive advantage over the United States” (Bolton 2018). Africa is, therefore, depicted as a continent up for grabs and this has become even more prominent with the rise of China and its increased engagement with Africa (Dok and Thayer 2019).

The portrayal of African states as “system ineffectual” is not without basis. Africa’s material capabilities support the “lack-of-agency” argument. For example, the aggregate GDP of Sub-Saharan Africa in 2018 was US\$1.7 trillion—at par with the GDP of Canada, slightly higher than South Korea’s (US\$1.6 trillion) and less than Brazil’s (US\$1.8 trillion). With such a paltry GDP

and under the weight of incessant intrastate-armed conflicts, political instability, poverty, and food insecurity, Sub-Saharan Africa is dependent on foreign aid and humanitarian assistance from external donors. Even its continental body, the African Union, is headquartered in a building constructed and donated by China and aid is its largest source of funding, the EU being the biggest donor (Pharatlhatlhe and Vanheukelom 2019, 5). Unsurprisingly, for both the EU and China, Africa is the biggest beneficiary of their development and humanitarian assistance, a fact that highlights the region's incapacity to underwrite its own development, security, and sustenance. Such is the extent of Africa's fragility and impotence that Jean-Francois Bayart (2009, 5) concluded that Africa is "permanently under the yoke of external actors." These "external actors" that Jean-Francois Bayart refers to, have varied across Africa's recent history, ranging from traditional colonial powers like Britain, France, and Portugal to the United States and now emerging economies such as China and India.

The lack in material capabilities means that the ideational capabilities of African states are of no major effect in international politics and are peripheral in global forums. The lack of ideational capabilities is exposed in global discourses on poverty and development in which Africa is the subject of discussion rather than an equal partner. In 2001, British Prime Minister Tony Blair described the state of Africa as "a scar on the conscience of the world" (Blair 2001). In addition, from the Structural Adjustment Programs of the late 1980s, to the crisis of governance narrative by the World Bank (1989), and more recently, China's model of development, Africa, together with Latin America, has been a testing ground for development paradigms created elsewhere. A survey of 36 African countries conducted by Afrobarometer in 2015 reveals the dominance of external models of development and the absence of "home-grown" models in Africa (Lekorwe *et al.* 2016). It showed that in the surveyed countries, China ranks second as a development model after the United States and as the greatest external influence in African countries after the countries' former colonial powers. The fact that Africa's varied models of governance, economy, and development mirror those of their former colonizers, or are enmeshed with aspects from other non-Western regions, reflects the ideational crisis in Africa. A further illustration of this challenge is that, despite attempts by South Africa's former President Thabo Mbeki to promote African ethos and norms such as *Ubuntu* under the African Renaissance movement, their application in international relations has remained marginal and subservient to Western norms of humanitarianism, development, and politics (Hodzi 2017a).

Based on these material and ideational challenges, it seems justified to portray Africa as ineffectual, lacking agency, and a passive recipient of charity from the West, and more recently from China. Despite increasing research on the agency of African states in their relations with global powers, especially China (Carmody and Taylor 2010; Chiyemura 2019; Hodzi 2017b; Lopes 2016; Mohan and Lampert 2013), the portrayal of African states as ineffectual and impotent is persistent. Based on this backdrop, and going beyond the agency of African states and their ruling elites, this article explores how states in Africa are strategically

shaping the norms of development paradigms promoted by foreign powers and socializing external actors. Empirically focusing on China's development model in Africa, the article examines how political elites in countries like Ethiopia and Zimbabwe are shaping and diffusing norms related to the model; and how, through their ingenuity, China is being socialized into their preferred regional order. The main argument is that political elites in the two countries are strategically reconstructing the China model, creating their own multifaceted versions that delicately balance their own domestic interests and their bilateral relations with China, while deriving maximum benefits from the People's Republic of China.

Opportunities Presented by China to African Elites

The lack of African states' material and ideational capabilities mask the agency of its political elites. In this article, political elites refer to "distinct high-level political officials (the president, his/her advisers and cabinet ministers) collectively referred to as the Executive" who, by virtue of positions they occupy in government, "have the authority to make, enforce and ensure implementation of their domestic and foreign policies" (Hodzi 2017a, 193). In terms of structural power, defined by Susan Strange (1988, 25) as the power "to decide how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to each other, relate to people, or relate to corporate enterprises," it is critical to shift focus from African states to political elites in Africa. This is because, notwithstanding their weak states, some political elites in Africa, even at the height of the Cold War, became experts "in appearing to emulate the ideologies of their patrons to coax out further material support" (Corkin 2013, 3). Although their capacity to play global powers against each other whittled under the United States' unipolar moment, the attempt by China to play a key role in international development has created opportunities for them to strategically shape and reframe development paradigms promoted by global powers and implemented in Africa to suit their domestic and international objectives. However, how does the emergence of China as an actor in international development provide them with such an opportunity?

The People's Republic of China refers to its development trajectory as an experience that other countries, especially in the Global South, can learn from. In Xi Jinping's words, "it offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence" (Xinhua 2017). Indeed, China's extraordinary economic growth and highly effective poverty reduction mechanisms have provided an example worth emulating, especially for developing countries that for long had become disenchanted by the liberal development paradigm. Opportunities presented to African Elites by China as a key actor in international development. As a result, political leaders, scholars, and the media started alluding to the existence of a China model of development. What the China model of development actually is contested. Stephen Halper (2010, 48) refers to it as the Beijing Consensus and describes it as a "market

authoritarian model”—suggesting that it rivals the neoliberal development paradigm capsulated in the Washington Consensus. Zhang (2012, 65), the leading proponent of the China model, describes it as a socialist market economy unique to China. Although several other scholars (see e.g., Chen and Naughton 2017; deLisle 2017; Kennedy 2010; Ramo 2004; Zhang 2012; Zhao 2017) have also sought to decipher the China model, there remain diverse interpretations and findings, making it difficult to determine what the China model is. Making it even more puzzling is that there is no consensus among government officials in China on the existence of a China model and its conceptualization. As a result, the Chinese government sends mixed signals—denying the existence of the China model while simultaneously urging BRICS countries to synergize their development strategies to enhance international development. Yet, even in the absence of an official conceptualization of the China model, political elites in Zimbabwe, the Gambia, and Ethiopia, among others, allude to a China model inspiring their own development policies and strategies.

References to the China model of development provide several opportunities to African political elites, and those opportunities are encapsulated in three contradictions in China’s foreign policy strategy. The first contradiction is China’s conflicting dual identity as both a developing country and a major country. In April 2019, Beijing insisted on retaining its categorization as a developing country at the WTO to continue benefiting from “special and differentiated treatment” (Lee 2019). In addition, the developing country status enables China to gain competitive advantage in developing countries, giving credence to its South-South cooperation, the view of mutually beneficial, peaceful development, and the win-win principles that underscore its Africa strategy. In that respect, the developing country identity gives its development model legitimacy in Africa because it promotes the model as peer-to-peer learning compared to the asymmetries of the liberal development paradigm and North-South cooperation. The categorization as a developing country also provides China with maneuverability in global governance and provision of public goods. It enables Beijing to select international responsibilities based on its current interests. At the same time, China has, since the presidency of Xi Jinping, identified itself as a major country seeking an equal say with the United States in global governance, and pushing for “major country diplomacy” which can be interpreted as a demand to co-govern with the United States. The implication of this contradictory dual identity is that the “developing country” identity is getting less buy-in among African political elites—who are increasingly seeing China as a major power seeking to avoid international responsibilities, and therefore, not a sincere South-South partner.

The second contradiction is that Beijing acknowledges its ambition to expand its global influence but denies seeking hegemony. In his speech to delegates at the 19th Communist Party of China (CPC) National Congress, Xi Jinping (Xi 2017, 53) declared that, “No matter what stage of development it reaches, China will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion.” Earlier on in the speech, he

had stated that by 2035, “China’s cultural soft power [should have] grown much stronger” (23); and that from 2035 to the middle of the twenty-first century, China should “have become a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence” (25). Beijing’s insistence on not seeking to be a hegemon is meant to dispel the China threat theory, and reassure the Global South that it will not use its economic preponderance to intervene in the internal affairs of other states and enforce its norms on them. Yet China’s behavior in the South China Sea dispute, and the way it imposes trade sanctions on countries that take contra-Beijing positions on issues such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Uyghur Muslims show its tendency to use material capabilities to achieve its objectives. Similarly, as put by George Yu (1966, 468),

while accepting Africa’s goal of economic independence, China once more has sought to shape that goal in accordance with her own policy objectives. [And] The emphasis on self-reliance, for example, interacts with the limited capacity of Peking actually to provide large-scale aid and its intense reluctance to see such aid provided by others.

Thus, Beijing’s antihegemony statements obscure its hegemonic behavior and ambitions.

As put by Robert Cox (1994, 366), “hegemony is a form in which dominance is obscured by achieving an appearance of acquiescence... As if it were the natural order of things [it] is an internalized coherence which has most probably arisen from externally imposed rules but has been transformed into an intersubjectively constituted reality.” Indeed, China has framed its dominance over other countries and justified punishing countries that do not abide by the One China Policy, understood as mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty and noninterference, thus, giving it an appearance of acquiescence. For instance, on three occasions, China pressured the South African government to deny the Dalai Lama a visa to visit the country. Moreover, because it does not use its military power to enforce compliance with its policies, China reasons that it does not seek hegemony but just greater influence. However, Richard Saull (2010) argues that force is an exception in hegemonic arrangements—and therefore, the nonuse of force or violence by China does not mean that it is not hegemonic in its ambitions and behavior—it simply suggests that China is better at obscuring them.

Does China have a development model or not? This question reflects the third contradiction. On the one hand, China claims that,

the path, the theory, the system, and the culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics have kept developing, blazing a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization. It offers a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and it offers Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind. (Xi 2017, 9)

Statements like these reflect China's growing confidence in its role as a major power able to exercise global influence—and provides an alternative to African states looking for new models to achieve development. On the other hand, it claims that the model cannot be replicated by other countries because it is exceptional to China. By saying, it does not have a model that can be copied; China is indirectly influencing African countries to trust China as a nonimposing power, thus, making its model of development more appealing. Either way, Beijing is indirectly socializing African elites to reject “imposed” Western development models that are in competition with China's model of development. Accordingly, “Africa, in short, is subordinate in Chinese thought and policy to a *Weltanschauung*—which in turn derives from the manner in which the Chinese Communist leaders relate their historic experiences to the modern world and their current sense of Chinese national interest” (Yu 1966, 468).

In claiming that its development trajectory provides an option for other countries, Beijing implies that it has a model of development that other countries can adopt and adapt to fit their contexts. Whether the countries adopt it voluntarily or under duress is not the issue—the issue is that there is a model of development and modernization that Beijing believes is applicable to countries in the Global South. The establishment of training institutions such as the Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development (ISSCAD), set up by the Chinese government at Peking University in 2016 to train “government officials and social elites from developing countries for a professional degree of national development” reflects China's confidence in its development model (MOFCOM 2016). According to China's Ministry of Commerce, “the aim is to share the experience of state management, to deal with politics, to help other developing countries cultivate high-end government management personnel and to jointly discuss a development road of multi-elements” (MOFCOM 2016). In using these training institutions to promote its development model, the expectation is that “as other countries learn and adopt aspects of the China model, they will become more likely to align with China, to share China's values, and to connect with China's leaders” (Kurlantzick 2013). Furthermore, this implies that China has a model of development aimed at teaching other countries to achieve national development in the same manner that it achieved its own development—and the adoption of China's development model by Africa will enhance its international status and global influence.

Implications of the Three Contradictions

The effect of these three main contradictions is that there is no consensus, even within the Communist Party of China, on what the China model is. Without a clear and concise conceptualization of the China model, there can be no regime to underpin it—making it less developed compared to its rival, the liberal development paradigm. As put by Yuen Yuen Ang (2018), “despite urging other countries to learn from ‘Chinese wisdom’ and ‘the China solution’,”

Xi never specifies what this means.” The implication is that, depending on the audience, certain characteristics of the China model are highlighted, and they mostly consist of the following: (1) practice-based reasoning; (2) a strong state; (3) prioritizing stability; (4) primacy of the people’s livelihood; (5) gradual reform; (6) correct priorities and sequences; (7) a mixed socialist economy; and (8) opening up to the outside world (Zhang 2012, 89). More recently, Xi Jinping has begun to enunciate the “Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics” which underpin China’s domestic and foreign policy (Xi 2017). The main components of the Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics as explained by President Xi on October 18, 2017 are: (1) ensuring Party leadership over all work; (2) committing to people-centered approach; (3) continuing to comprehensively deepen reform; (4) adopting a new vision for development; (5) seeing that people run the country; (6) ensuring every dimension of governance is law based; (7) upholding core socialist values; (8) ensuring and improving living standards through development; (9) ensuring harmony between human and nature; (10) pursuing holistic approach to national security; (11) upholding absolute Party leadership over the people’s armed forces; (12) upholding the principle of “one country, two systems” and promoting national reunification; (13) promoting the building of a community with a shared future for mankind; and (14) exercising full and rigorous governance over the Party. Principal components of the “Thought” are the primacy of the CPC over all matters, and the preeminence of development, which acts as the legitimizer of the CPC rulership. This cocktail of unexpatiated characteristics, maxims, and thoughts make it difficult for Beijing to provide a comprehensive model of development that is clear for the Global South to follow.

Regardless of the murkiness of the China model, Beijing seems convinced that its development trajectory is relevant to other developing countries and is essential for the “further rise in China’s international influence, ability to inspire, and power to shape” (Xi 2017, 6). To underpin that rise in international influence and spur the traction of its development experience in the Global South, China’s strategy includes setting up alternative financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Through these alternative institutions, Beijing “aims to lock in a Sinocentric vision of the world through parallel institutions, disruptive initiatives, and rewriting of global rules” (Feigenbaum 2018). In addition, major projects such as “the Belt and Road Initiative, give equal emphasis to ‘bringing in’ and ‘going out,’ follow the principle of achieving shared growth through *discussion* and *cooperation*, and increase openness and cooperation in building innovation capacity” (Xi 2017, 30). Importantly, *discussion* and *cooperation* are the means through which China seeks to establish its global influence and legitimize its development model. The *discussion* and *cooperation* strategy resembles Keohane’s (1984, 78-9) neoliberal paradigm argument that a hegemony can be formed “through intensive interaction among a few players [which] helps to substitute for, or supplement, the actions of a hegemon.” However, *discussion* and *cooperation* entail the existence of a community of states.

China is gradually, but subtly, setting up that community of states, with itself at the center—more like a Sino-centric community of states. According to President Xi, China is creating “a garden shared by all countries” enabling them to share in its development and prosperity (Xi 2016). Although Beijing argues that it is not seeking to become a hegemon, its “garden-for-all-countries” ambition is an attempt to create “shared interests by providing rewards for cooperation and punishment for defection” (Keohane 1984, 79). Indeed, with the establishment of AIIB and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has effectively established an alternative community of states. As the main architect of this “garden” or community of states, China sets the rules of membership and engagement in its institutions thus creating a web of influence through rule making and institutional building. In other words, through AIIB and BRI, China determines who becomes part of these institutions and who does not, thereby providing rewards for members of the institutions and effectively punishing-by-exclusion those states that do not conform. For instance, because Swaziland maintains diplomatic ties with Taiwan, which is against the One China Policy, it is excluded from BRI projects and Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summits. The implication is that China has a community of states (still in the formative stages) and platforms such as FOCAC for it to put into effect its *discussion* and *cooperation* strategy.

These platforms, in particular the FOCAC summits, have increasingly become institutionalized, enabling China to socialize African states into its preferred norms which is critical for its *discussion* and *cooperation* strategy to be effective. Socialization

‘is a process of learning in which norms and ideals are transmitted from one party to another’ the expectation is that ‘national leaders internalize the norms and value orientations espoused by the hegemony and, as a consequence, become socialized into the community formed by the hegemony and other nations accepting its leadership position.’ (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, 289-90)

The challenge for China, concerning its model of development, is that there are no clear-cut norms apart from the generalized, South-South Cooperation, respect for state sovereignty, noninterference, and mutual benefit. In addition, without consensus, even in Beijing on which the China model is based, the process of “inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community” is ineffective because there can be no compliance without consensus on the norms and rules to be complied with (Checkel 2005, 804). The effect is that, in Africa, political elites are following the logic of consequences rather than the logic of appropriateness. As highlighted earlier on, African elites simply acquiesce to China’s declarations at FOCAC summits to access material benefits; hence, they are driven by fear of consequences of being excluded from China’s community, or “garden,” as Xi Jinping puts it—there is no internalization of any norms.

In addition to FOCAC summits, China has used bilateral engagement and direct contact with African political elites as part of its *discussion* and *cooperation* strategy. Through tailor-made training programs for government officials from Africa, cultural exchanges, high-level government exchanges, and party-to-party exchanges, the Chinese government has direct interaction with African political elites. Beijing's objective is that these African elites will internalize China's norms and realign their countries' domestic and foreign policies with Beijing's core interests. Through reliance on "ideological persuasion and transnational learning," Ikenberry and Kupchan (1990, 290) argue that a dominant power can "produce cooperative outcomes without resorting to material sanctions and inducements." The effectiveness of this strategy is yet to be seen, but so far, there has been no significant shift in most African countries' policies, partly because there is no consensus on what the Chinese model of development norms are.

Instead, although professing support for China's domestic and foreign policy, most African political elites "embrace and espouse the [policies] articulated by the hegemony for instrumental reasons, either to minimize domestic costs of compliant behavior or to take advantage of elite restructuring to build new coalitions" (Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990, 291). The main reason is that the strategy of most African elites is to pretend to follow the ideological preferences of China to derive material benefits, while doing the same to the United States and the EU. They have to juggle the "perceived norms" of the China model of development and governance with maintaining legitimacy as a democratic state to continue benefitting from the West. Accordingly, what China regards as a community is a loose collective of pragmatic and self-interested states that are in it for the rewards that China provides—and there is no internalization of community rules.

The Agency of African Political Elites

China's public support for multilateralism mask its "private" preference for bilateralism. In the case of Africa, while the FOCAC summits reflect a multilateral approach, the projects and initiatives announced at the summits are negotiated bilaterally. The effect of bilateralism between a global power like China and a small state in Africa is that there are "two key problems: information asymmetry and preferences asymmetry" (Regilme 2018, 346). In other words, although political elites in Africa are invited to FOCAC summits, specialized trainings, high-level exchanges, etc., their bureaucracies in Africa still lack complete information about the China model of development and the regimes that underpin it. The absence of consensus on what the China model is among elites in Beijing does not make it better. Neither does Beijing's insistence on China's exceptionalism—the argument that China's economic development is a result of its uniqueness. Accordingly, there is no known official policy document in Beijing that explains its development model, and the fact that until recently there was no centralized

development assistance management framework means that African elites are susceptible to competition among Chinese ministries and departments. The effect is that African political elites know substantially little about the China model to implement it in their own countries. As a result, they tend to select elements of the model that advance their domestic and international interests. For instance, an Ethiopian diplomat in Beijing explained that Ethiopia is learning about China's strong state to implement the same in Ethiopia. At the end, Ethiopia will end up with its own version of a development model, which it then labels "the Chinese model of development" to superficially align it with China.

The second effect is that there is a preference asymmetry between China and African political elites. China's objective, as explained by Zhang (2012, x), is to promote "a new model of development and a new political discourse which questions many of the Western assumptions about democracy, good governance and human rights." While several African elites have questioned those Western assumptions of democracy and governance, they have done so not necessarily because of socialization from China, but out of frustration with the West. For instance, former President of Zimbabwe Robert Mugabe started questioning the sincerity of the West and its democracy promotion when the EU and the United States imposed sanctions on the country because of his regime's human rights abuses. It is only then that he launched the "Look East Policy" and cultivated stronger diplomatic relations with China. The driving force for Mugabe was the need for an alternative development partner and source for diplomatic support, foreign direct investment, and development financing. Meles Zenawi, the former prime minister of Ethiopia, also disgruntled by the West's emphasis on democracy and human rights, cultivated Ethiopia's relations with China and sought to apply what he termed a "developmental state model" in Ethiopia to strengthen his regime. African elites' engagement and adoption of China's "preferred norms" is not based on the attractiveness of its model of development. It has been used to justify a strong state that guarantees their regimes' survival. Therefore, depending on the domestic and transnational interests of particular elites, they emphasize elements of the model that can potentially advance their interests.

African countries, due to their colonial heritage, derive their legitimacy from acceptance by the international community (Jackson 1987). For that, they have to maintain a façade of democracy, a respect for human rights, and align with the liberal international order norms. Generally, states in Africa mirror the European state in terms of institutions and norms, which is usually repulsive to the norms and principles that underpin the China model—a strong state and socialist market economy. Furthermore, because their legitimacy depends on acceptance by the West, their internalization of China's development, political, and governance systems is only to the extent that it does not upset domestic and international actors. To get around this challenge, as noted by Regilme (2018, 349), these elites "redefine external norms as a *political strategy*, in which the quintessential goal is to enhance

political authority and promote regime survival.” For instance, in Rwanda, President Kagame has justified his authoritarian leadership as necessary to achieve economic development—just as the CPC does in China. In addition to appeasing both China and the West, the African political elites also consider local recipients, particularly opposition leaders who may have enough influence to challenge their regimes’ survival. For example, President Julius Maada Bio of Sierra Leone canceled a US\$300 million airport deal signed by his predecessor and China. The official reason was that it was “uneconomical to proceed with the construction of a new airport when the existing one is grossly under-utilized” (Marsh and Westcott 2018). However, this reason masked the domestic political dynamics. The president was under pressure to reverse deals signed by his predecessor that lacked transparency. In exercising their agency in this manner, political elites in Africa are able to force China to reconsider how it conducts its business and engages with Africa.

Beijing promotes its model of development as an alternative for countries that want to achieve national development without losing their sovereignty. The subtle objective is to inspire African elites to challenge interventions by the West while aligning themselves with China as a source of inspiration for “independent” development. In that respect, China increases its influence by offering an alternative to the United States, which in turn emboldens authoritarian regimes that undermine liberal values. China is using this strategy “to secure its position at home and abroad... as a result of pragmatic decisions about Chinese interests rather than a wholesale rejection of the U.S.-led international order” (Weiss 2019). Similarly, political elites like those headed by Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Edgar Lungu (Zambia), and Emmerson Mnangagwa (Zimbabwe) are also using their engagement with China to challenge the liberal values, while strengthening state surveillance of their citizens and shrinking democratic space. In 2017, Mnangagwa announced that he was going to implement socialism with Zimbabwean characteristics and consider the Chinese development model as an alternative for Zimbabwe (The Standard 2018). The sincerity of these claims is doubtful because, beyond the pronouncements, there has been very little evidence of the China model except elements that strengthen his position in power. What makes it possible for these African elites to select those elements of the China model that advance their domestic and international interests is that no regimes underpin the China model. This provides opportunities for political elites in Africa to instrumentalize “policy discourses in an attempt to justify the perceived relative gains of bilateral interstate cooperation” (Regilme 2018, 344).

China and African Elites: Who is Playing Whom?

The instrumentalization and *transactionalization* of China-Africa relations brings us to what may seem an unrelated topic: who is playing whom? Why do African elites break deals signed with China by their predecessors? Why is China

increasingly becoming selective on the deals that it signs with African countries? Does this have any implications for the evolution of the China model?

The cancelation and renegotiation of infrastructure construction deals by African elites is indicative of their agency and attempt to reshape their countries' relations with China. Yet there are complexities emanating from the underlying conflation of personal, national, and global interests. For example, the personal power preservation interests of President Julius Maada Bio motivated the cancelation of an airport construction deal backed by Chinese loans in Sierra Leone. Canceling a deal signed by a predecessor in the name of the national interest—at a time when competition between the United States and China for influence in Africa is on the increase—was possibly the surest way for President Bio to enhance his legitimacy and gain the support of the United States. In the same manner, President John Magufuli of Tanzania suspended the US\$10 billion Bagamoyo Port project agreed by his predecessor Jakaya Kikwete arguing that “conditions set by the investor were tantamount to selling Tanzania to China” (Onyango 2019). He then imposed five conditions, which the investor, the China Merchants Holdings International (CMHI), a Beijing-based company, had to agree to for the project to resume. The conditions included reduction of CMHI's lease agreement from 99 years to 33 years, removal of the tax holiday, and special status on water and electricity rates. He also quashed the no-competition clause, allowing the government of Tanzania to develop other ports to compete with the Bagamoyo Port, and prohibited CMHI from starting any business within the port without the approval of the Tanzanian government. Through this, Magufuli was able to reassert his authority and legitimacy in Tanzania, which was waning due to increased authoritarian tendencies. More importantly, it enabled him to dilute what he regards as Chinese dominance in Tanzania by bringing in other investors from Oman into the port project. Thus, the reasserting of agency by some African elites is a cocktail resulting from generous dashes of personal, national, and geopolitical interests.

Meanwhile, China is recalibrating its interests in Africa as a response to an increased questioning of its operations by some African elites. Most importantly, the recalibration is to address losses resulting from poor investments in Africa and wastage of resources. In 2015, China refused, despite signing several memorandum agreements, to fund former Zimbabwe President Mugabe's US\$4 billion infrastructure and economic revival program. Media reports citing government officials suggested that China was concerned about political instability, corruption, inefficiencies in government, and lack of viability of the proposed projects (Mail and Guardian 2015). As a result, there were reports that Beijing wanted to second Chinese officials in Zimbabwe's ministries and parastatals to secure its investments from widespread government corruption. Such consideration of local politics to make decisions regarding the funding of projects reflects a shift in China's policy of noninterference in the internal affairs of its partners. Beyond that, China has also rejected funding proposals from Kenya and Uganda on the basis that the projects were not financially

viable—even though they were of paramount political importance to President Kenyatta (Kenya) and President Museveni (Uganda) who are facing elections in the next year. These few examples show that insofar as African elites are reasserting their agency in their countries' relations with China, China is also restructuring its operations in Africa, and paying more attention to its overall geopolitical, national, and economic interests.

Part of the restructuring of Beijing's engagement with Africa is motivated by domestic concerns in China that investments and loans granted to African countries have not achieved the intended results. Flagship projects such as the Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway funded up to US\$4 billion and the Mombasa-Nairobi railway project, which cost upward of US\$3 billion, mostly in Chinese-backed loans, have been operating below capacity. As a result, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed renegotiated the repayment period of the loans from 10 years to 30 years. Kenya's appeal for a loan to extend the Mombasa-Nairobi railway was rejected by China. In addition, calls by several African countries for China to cancel their debts have not been successful. All these developments are part of Beijing's efforts to consolidate its BRI and restructure its investments across the globe to focus on the most productive, in economic and geopolitical terms. The setting up of training institutions such as ISSCAD to teach political elites from the Global South, especially in Africa, plus backing public administration and governance strategies necessary to implement the China model, together with major infrastructure projects such as the BRI, are steps toward rebalancing relations with Africa and ensure success of its major projects there. To plug inefficiencies in its aid allocation and management, the establishment of the China International Development Cooperation Agency will reduce free-riding and the careless disbursement of development assistance, of which Africa is the biggest recipient. The implication is that the emergence of African elites' agency is at odds with the weakened state of African economies and their dependence on China for investments and infrastructure loans. Nonetheless, this is not new for Africa. In the Cold War era, despite their weakness, African elites still managed to play big powers, including China and Russia, against each other. But, as the global coronavirus pandemic takes its toll on most global powers amid a resurgence of ultranationalism in the United States and the United Kingdom, African elites may not have as many options as they had before—which strengthens China's position in Africa.

Conclusion

The implementation of the China model in Africa is hamstrung. First, there is no consensus within and outside China on what constitutes the China model—let alone the norms that premise it. Second, the model is not implemented in a vacuum, the making of the African state is based on liberal values of democracy and human rights that are antithetical to the China model. For China to

socialize African countries, African states' social, cultural, political, and economic systems need to be reconstituted. However, with Chinese ideologies such as socialism with Chinese characteristics emphasizing the exceptionalism of China, it is difficult to derive norms from China's model of development. The result is that some political elites in Africa are selecting elements of the China model that they prefer and that serve their domestic and international interests. Beijing is, therefore, losing control of the norm development, diffusion, and socialization of African states. Instead, it is being forced to reconsider and be pragmatic in the norms it advances to African countries—something akin to the proverbial “crossing the river by feeling the stones.”

Even in cases where China has reframed its engagement with Africa, with a community of states held by the logic of consequences rather than the logic of appropriateness, alignment with the China model by African elites is superficial. At best, it is transactional, and using their agency, African political elites are leveraging on China to renegotiate their reengagement with the West, ensure their regimes' survival and contain internal dissent in their countries. As put by Yan (2015), China's strategy is to “allow smaller countries to benefit economically from their relationship with China. For China, we need good relationships more urgently than we need economic development. We let them benefit economically, and in turn, we get good political relationships. We should ‘purchase’ the relationships.” The purchase of relationships and influence by China has further strengthened African elites' leverage and agency—enabling them to derive massive benefits for very little policy alignment with Beijing. In fact, Beijing's model of development is used to justify their regime survival strategies.

In addition, the implementation of the China model through alternative institutions such as the BRI and AIIB is effective with African political elites' collaboration. That gives African political elites leverage to negotiate and reshape the China model so that what ends up being labeled the China model depends on the domestic and international interests of the African government. Hence, there are multivariate versions of the China model. This means that China has no monopoly over the norms, values, and principles that underpin its development paradigm. Furthermore, with limited regimes to back its *discussion* and *cooperation* strategy, and the fact that China is not expanding its influence in a vacuum, but in a political, cultural, and economic space already occupied by former colonial powers that still maintain influence in their former African colonies, Beijing lacks the capacity to enforce and promote the China model in Africa. In addition, it is this *discussion* and *cooperation* that African elites have seized and used to their advantage—negotiating and influencing the China's strategy in Africa and its implementation, in most cases favoring African countries that retain the power to decide the kind of investments, developments, and relations they want with China.

Finally, China does not have an alternative order in place. Neither has it laid out what the China model is and how it can be implemented. While there

is a liberal international order (which is honored more in the breach than in the observance), there is no alternative Chinese order. The implication is that the China model, with its principles and underpinning norms, is implemented within a liberal international order context. This has created opportunities for political elites to influence the norms that underpin the China model, recreating it in some cases and molding it to suit their own domestic and global preferences in others. Accordingly, strategic reframing and interpretation of the China model by political elites in Africa is contributing to shaping the model and how it is perceived globally, for good or bad.

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