

Alden, C. (2007). China in Africa. London: Zed Books.

Reviewed by

Constantine Munhande

Department of Development Studies, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe

Chinese growing influence in Africa in the 21st century is no longer a myth; it is a reality. From Sudan down to South Africa and Tanzania to Nigeria, Chinese businesses have become part and parcel, if not the dominant, of the domestic business milieu. In big projects, such as oil exploration, mining, and construction that require large capital outlays, Chinese businesses have actually become major investors in many countries. This phenomenon has provoked heated debates among intellectuals on the continent and beyond on the impact of Chinese business activities on the continent. This debate is polarized between those who are the majority, who argue that the new engagement between China and the continent has nothing to offer for Africa's development agenda, but continued exploitation, and those who see an opportunity for African development. Chris Alden's *China in Africa* is part and parcel of this debate. The book, in trying to present a balanced and holistic argument, investigates the emerging relationship between China and Africa to determine whether this engagement will be that of a development partner, economic competitor, or new hegemony.

The introduction gives an overview of the China and Africa relations. It also presents the format in which the book is structured. A larger section of this section, however, gives an elaborate description of the China-Africa summit held in Beijing. The author deliberately gives much attention to this summit in order to indicate brief and growing relations between the two regions.

In chapter one of the book, (China's new foreign policy towards Africa), Chris Alden largely traces the rather complex development of China's new foreign policy towards Africa. China's rabid economic growth into a powerful industrial and world power is identified as being at the locus of China's new foreign policy. To maintain and sustain this economy, the world's fastest growing economy, the Chinese authorities recognized the importance of engaging Africa so as to tap her vast resources. Evidence of growing Chinese influence and investment is provided through the businesses that have now been established by the Chinese in almost every country on the continent.

In the same chapter, the author grapples with the foreign policy strategies that China has employed to out compete the west as Africa's leading investor and trade partner. These include diplomatic investments, financial incentives in the form of investment and development assistance, the reinvigoration of past, positive China-Africa relations, such as the role of China in the fight against colonialism in southern Africa, and military assistance to "pariah" regimes, like Sudan and Zimbabwe, debt cancellations, as well as gifts in kind.

In chapter two, (Chinese in Africa: Capitalists, Comrades and carpet baggers), the author discusses the motivations, operations, and evaluates the nature of Chinese engagement on the continent. It is observed that whilst much media

attention has been given to the negative impact of the Chinese engagement on the continent, this engagement has also had some positives on the locals, particularly the consumers. For instance, much of the small and small to medium enterprises sell generally low quality products, but which are affordable to the poor in Africa. Furthermore, most of these businesses have been taken right to the people in the villages. It is also noted that this movement of business has been accompanied by a new wave of Chinese immigrants into the continent. This movement, both legal and illegal, has been necessitated by the promise of opportunities in Africa, as well as the rapid urbanization in China, which has seen most peasants, as well as much of the population, in general, losing their livelihood sources to big projects and urban facilities.

In chapter three, (Africa turns east), the author examines Africa's responses to Chinese incursions into the region. The author divides these responses into four categories: the responds of pariah regimes; illiberal regimes; weak democracies; and democracies with diversified economies. It is argued that pariah regimes, such as Sudan and Zimbabwe, have warmly embraced the Chinese as a source of stability, new strategic partner, and a source of development funds, given their condemned status by the rest of the international community. For democracies with diversified economies, South Africa in particular, the response has been rather complex and cautious. This is attributed to their strong economies, which stand to compete with Chinese businesses. Furthermore, because of the entrenched democracy in these countries, their labor and business organizations, as well as civil society, wield a great deal of power, which has blocked Chinese incursions where it threatens the interests of local businesses and citizens. Africa's diplomacy response as a block is also interrogated. It is contended that this response has been largely un-coordinated by being dominated by parochial and elite interests at the expense, broader among the population.

In chapter four, (Between Hope and fear: Western reactions to China), the author analyzes the western countries' responds to the Chinese "Cyclonic" incursion into the region. First, the west's partnership with Africa in the post-colonial and post-Cold War eras is reviewed. The author notes that as western political rivalry diminished, coinciding with a new generation of African leaders influenced by liberal ideas of the power of the market and importance of democracy, there has emerged a shared agenda to transform Africa (p. 95). This agenda rests on substantial intervention and concerted financial support from the world's leading economies, the G8, who have pledged resources to help.

It is observed that this agenda, which predicated financial resources on conditions of good governance, set the west on a collision course with the Chinese policy of "non interference". The Chinese approach has, therefore, frustrated western efforts to restructure the economic and political life on the continent by providing an alternative source of "aid" without conditions. This approach has not only been a source of disenchantment to the western governments, but NGOs as well. The later have been particularly incensed by the fact that while in the new western agenda, the aim is one of reducing poverty, partly through debt cancellation, cheap Chinese loans are undermining this very effort.

In chapter five, (Consolidating China-Africa relations), the author reviews some of the bad practices perpetrated by both the Chinese government and her business community in their conduct in Africa. It is suggested that if China is to further consolidate her relations with the continent, there is need to improve in these areas. For instance, in one part of government, there is need to review the way they conduct themselves with pariah regimes. A disregard by the Chinese authorities of the bad record of these regimes has got high chances of setting her on a collision course with the rest of the world, which may affect their business prospects in future. Meanwhile, Chinese businesses have set the worst record for

poor working conditions and low wages, a point also underscored by Volker Winterfeldt (p. 75) in **Transitions in Namibia**, (2008). It is warned that if such practices are not urgently looked into by both government and business, there is a high likelihood of resistance to Chinese investment by the locals who are touted as the supposed beneficiaries of Chinese investment.

In the conclusion, the author posits that the future of the China-Africa engagement largely depends on how the Africans manage the Chinese. The coming of the Chinese, on the other hand, at least gives the continent a wide range of potential financial players from which to choose, rather than in the past where the West was the only available option. This scenario has raised the financial stakes in favor of the continent.

Overall, the book presents a well balanced argument of China-Africa relations. For anybody trying to understand the relationship between the two regions, the book is the starting point for both academics and others. One may point out that the book is too generalized by trying to look at the whole African region, but to me, that is the strength of the book. For those needing further insight into the Chinese relations with specific countries, other country studies then become handy.

About the Reviewer:

Constantine Munhande is a lecturer in the department of Development Studies, Midlands State University, Gweru, Zimbabwe