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PSC 497 Honick
Capstone Paper
5/9/2021

A Drowning Man Grabs Hold of the Crocodile:
Chinese Aid and Soft Power in Africa

Introduction:

In the March 12, 2021 edition of the show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, the comedian and political commentator aired a segment on why the People's Republic of China (PRC) is winning the battle for the 21st century against the United States. While Maher does criticize the authoritarian policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as numerous human rights violations committed against Uyghurs in Xinxiang and protesters in Hong Kong, he also praises China for its utilitarianism. "In two generations, China has built 500 entire cities from scratch, moved the majority of their huge population from poverty to the middle class, and mostly cornered the market in 5G and pharmaceuticals." To further emphasize his point, Maher says, "Oh, and they bought Africa."¹ I was instantly intrigued by Maher's choice of words, especially with the fact he had said that the Chinese had bought Africa rather than stole or took over the continent. While this was just a bit on a late-night show and I am not sure of Maher's level of awareness about the true magnitude of Chinese foreign aid in Africa, the quote does speak to an ongoing debate about whether or not China's soft power in Africa now exceeds the influence that the United States has throughout the continent.

Many point to China's economic dominance in Africa as an example of how the US is falling behind to China. Surprisingly, China has surpassed both the European Union and the United States as the largest trade partner in Africa as early as 2009. In 2016, trade between China and Africa peaked at nearly \$200 billion², but has dropped slightly as result of weak commodity prices affecting the price of African exports, even as Chinese exports continue to grow. Still,

¹ Real Time with Bill Maher

² China Africa Research Initiative

total China-Africa trade in 2019 amounted to \$192 billion and despite the fact that it took a considerable hit, as all global trade did as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is expected to once again break \$200 billion, while US trade with Africa has fallen by 50% since 2014 and was worth just over \$50bn in 2019³.

China has become the largest trade partner with the African continent largely through foreign aid in the form of non-conditional loans and strategic direct investments in infrastructure intended to foster economic interdependence. The CCP's foreign aid policy in Africa has evolved in scale and content, but the goal has always been to increase China's ability to project its soft power. Additionally, it can be argued that the Beijing Consensus provides an alternative and potential competitor to the Bretton Woods institutions. Furthermore, Chinese aid and economic activities in Africa are constructing new norms of foreign aid that have ramifications outside of the continent.

In order to understand China's rise to economic dominance in Africa, we have to examine the origins and the evolution of the CCP's foreign aid policy. I will also take into consideration the geopolitical and economic trends that facilitated the creation of this modern-day bargain system China has created with many African countries. Most importantly, I will provide the rationale behind the billions of dollars' worth of aid given to African countries by China in recent decades. For the most part, the West is concerned about China's intentions in Africa and losing their long-held grip on global trade. In a substantially ironic reversal of roles, it is now the West accusing China of neocolonialism in Africa. I will address this by analyzing the positive and negative effects of Chinese aid.

³ China Africa Research Initiative

Literature review:

The rationale for why countries provide foreign aid depends on which theory of international relations one applies to the topic. “According to political realism, it is a policy tool that originated in the Cold War to influence the political judgements of recipient countries in a bi-polar struggle”⁴. Realists theorized that with the end of the Cold War, aid levels would fall, and they would no longer be an important component of foreign policy. However, this has not been the case, as both the US and China have consistently been giving more and more aid since the 1990s. One could view this trend as endemic of the realist claim that the US and China are already in the midst of a new Cold War. “According to liberal internationalism, it is a set of programmatic measures designed to enhance the socio-economic and political development of recipient countries”⁵. While liberalism may inform the policy of the Bretton Woods institutions, I will prove that the CCP has always emphasized a “win-win” relationship concerning aid and respect for the sovereignty of recipient countries in matters of socio-economic affairs.

In my opinion, neither realism nor liberalism alone best describe China’s systematic approach to foreign aid. Therefore, I will take a constructivist approach in the examination of Chinese economic activity and foreign policy in Africa. “Constructivists have highlighted several themes. First, the idea of social construction suggests difference across context rather than a single objective reality. Constructivists have sought to explain or understand change at the international level”⁶. This notion that all states do not act based on the same principles, but rather on cultural context, is relevant to my argument that China foreign aid does not have the same core objectives as those of the Bretton Woods Institutions. “Second, constructivists have

⁴ Hattori 2

⁵ Hattori 2

⁶ Dunne, Kurki, & Smith 189

emphasized the social dimensions of international relations, and have demonstrated the importance of norms, rules, and language”⁷. The cultural context of China and the narrative pushed by CCP officials is leading to the creation of new norms for foreign aid and economic diplomacy in Africa. Lastly, constructivism postulates that international politics is not an objective reality but rather “a world of our making”⁸. This presents the possibility for change in the structure and norms that govern the international order.

The main theories of international relations, liberalism and realism, naturally place special emphasis on the effects of giving aid and the geopolitical calculations behind this seemingly altruistic practice, rather than formulating a clear definition of what constitutes foreign aid. Foreign aid is most broadly understood as funding given to advance the social, cultural, and economic development of less-advantaged country. Official development assistance (ODA) is defined by the traditional donors that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OCED). “This funding has to meet two criteria. First, the purpose of the funding must be primarily to promote economic development and welfare in the recipient country. Second, it must be given on a concessional basis. Export credits do not generally qualify as ODA, nor do grants and subsidies to support private investment”⁹. Funding that does not have grant element of 25% or that is for the explicit purpose of supporting importation or exportation, regardless how much of the funding is comprised of grant money, is considered other official flows (OFF). The most astounding aspect that I encountered in my research was that a large portion of what is colloquially called Chinese aid is actually OFF, and therefore not considered aid by the OCED. In an unofficial conversation with US Department of

⁷ Dunne, Kurki, & Smith 189

⁸ Onuf

⁹Bräutigam 14

Commerce officials, attorney advisor Mohammed Loraoui said that he thinks most “People of the ground don’t see it as aid”¹⁰. The composition of China’s official finance portfolio is highly pertinent in understanding how China is changing the paradigm of what is considered foreign aid.

Another important concept in the argument of my paper is soft power. The term soft power was coined in the 1980s by Joseph Nye to describe the ability of a nation to influence the decisions and policy of another country without using force or coercion. Nye argues that soft power depends on credibility above all else, and that a nation’s principal sources of soft power “its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority)”¹¹. While soft power isn’t incompatible with realism or liberalism, the concept is best understood through opinion and perception. Since soft power is social constructed,¹² it is only logical to maintain a constructivist lens in examining the concept.

Historical Context:

China-Africa trade and diplomacy predates European Colonialism as there is archeological evidence of trade between China and the east coast of Africa dating back to the 8th century. Chinese history scholars and CCP officials alike frequently mention the several voyages that Ming admiral Zheng He made to East Africa, among other destinations throughout the Indian Ocean, between the years of 1418 and 1433. Not only do the Chinese voyages predate Vasco de Gama, the first European to round the Cape of Good Hope, by 80 years, but Zheng He’s legendary treasure fleet that was comprised of approximately 63 junks with a combined

¹⁰ Loraoui

¹¹ Nye 84

¹² Nye 84

crew of over 28,000 men¹³ would have dwarfed the three comparatively small Portuguese vessels under Gama's command. The Chinese pride themselves in not claiming any land in Africa when it has been argued that they had the sufficient naval capability and mercantile interests to become a colonial state. Instead, Zheng He's fleet brought back the ambassadors from the Swahili city-states and gifts of tribute for the Emperor. The voyages of Zheng He are part of a cultural mythos in contemporary Chinese society that emphasize mutual respect for sovereignty and mutually beneficial foreign policy. The Chinese conception of foreign aid did not develop out of the same colonial and missionary legacy that many nations in the West share. However, both China and African countries shared the common experiences of the extractive policies of European colonialism as well as Western interference in their domestic politics.

Early Chinese Aid (1950-1975):

While many might regard China giving aid to Africa countries a recent phenomenon, nothing could be further from the truth. "The People's Republic of China extended aid in the 1950s to Algeria (1958) and Egypt (1959), and as sub-Saharan African countries became independent in the 1960s, China established aid programs in an additional eleven African countries"¹⁴. Early aid was given to African countries with similar ideological viewpoints and with an emphasis on promoting the self-reliance of the recipient countries. During the first decade of Communist rule, the aid to Africa was only a small portion of China's total foreign aid but would grow substantially during the 1960s and 1970s. The CCP's early foreign policy was influenced by both China's participation in the Nonaligned Movement as well as a desire for international recognition. The United States imposed a trade embargo on Communist China and

¹³ Levathes 101

¹⁴ Rotberg 199

the consequent breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations forced the CCP to search for other allies and potential trade partners. Chinese foreign aid was utilized to convince newly independent African nations, particularly if they were socialist or communist, to recognize Beijing instead of Taiwan and to counter both US and Soviet influence in Africa.

Chinese officials still point to the “Eight Principles of Foreign Economic and Technological Assistance” outlined by former CCP Premier Zhou Enlai during a 1964 state visit to Ghana as being the foundation for how Chinese foreign aid is conducted. “It would be based on equality, mutual benefit, and respect for the sovereignty of the host (the principles of peaceful coexistence). Loans would be non-conditional, low-interest or no interest, and easily reschedulable. Projects would use high-quality materials, have quick results, and boost self-reliance. Chinese experts would transfer their expertise ‘fully’ and live at the standard of local counterparts”¹⁵. All aid projects had to be mutually beneficial since China was, and still continues to be in many ways, a developing economy. Chinese loans were to be non-conditional and flexible contrasting the prescriptive loans offered by the Bretton Woods Institutions. Influenced by Maoist philosophy of self-reliance, many of the first Chinese projects in Africa focused on import substitution and domestic processing of raw materials that African countries had previously exported only to be reimported as finished products. “These aid principles were designed to compete simultaneously with the ‘imperialists’ (the United States) and the ‘revisionists’ (the Soviet Union) for Africa’s approval and support”¹⁶. While the content of Chinese aid has evolved, it has not deviated from the values enshrined in these principles. In addition, I would argue that the fact these principles were first introduced during a state tour of

¹⁵ Bräutigam 32

¹⁶ Sun

Africa demonstrates that the CCP envisioned foreign aid to Africa as a key tool in advancing Chinese soft power.

In 1967, Premier Enlai would also propose the flagship project of this period, the building of the 1,800km long TANZARA Railway (also called the Uhuru Railway: Swahili for Freedom Railway, or the Tanzam Railway). Between 1970-1975, 25,000 Chinese technicians and 50,000 local workers labored in an audacious effort to build the longest railway in Africa, at the height of the Cultural Revolution no less. The railway would connect the copper mines in the landlocked country of Zambia to the port of the capital of Tanzania, Dar el-Salam. The project was originally envisioned by infamous colonialist Cecil Rhodes, but only became a necessity when white supremacist Rhodesia threatened Zambia's ability to access the existing railway networks in Mozambique and Angola. Zambia's first President, Kenneth Kaunda, would once again call for the railway to be built, but was rejected by the World Bank, which deemed the project infeasible. It is the largest single infrastructure project China has undertaken in Africa to date, and the railway with its ten kilometers of tunnels and 300 bridges cost around 1 billion dollars to build¹⁷.

In accordance with "The 8 Principles", the loans to build the railway were interest-free and repayable over a 30-year period. The Chinese lived in extremely simple conditions, on par with the local population, and ate mostly what the locals did because of the difficulty of shipping food over long distances. Compare this with the Swedes, who around the same time, "built a hydroelectric dam at Kidatu and stayed in a beach hotel 150 miles away. They took helicopters to the building site. Decades later, little has changed in the way all of these actors actually work in Africa"¹⁸. The TANZARA railway would serve as a model for future Chinese large scale

¹⁷ Bräutigam 40

¹⁸ Bräutigam 132

development projects or prestige projects and it would also set a precedent for Chinese economic and political engagement in both countries. Tanzania and Zambia remain close allies and trading partners with the PRC. In fact, Tanzania and Zambia would both play an important role organizing the UN votes that would grant the PRC international recognition and Taiwan a seat on the UN Security Council 1971. In fact, African countries comprised 26 out of the total 76 votes in favor, prompting Mao to say “it is our African brothers who have carried us into the UN”¹⁹. Receiving international recognition was arguably the single biggest leap forward in the PRC’s soft power and it most definitely wouldn’t have been possible without the votes from African countries.

Transition to Capitalism and Window of Opportunity (1978-2000):

As China gradually transitioned to a capitalist mode of production under Deng Xiaoping post-1978, the CCP began to pursue a more pragmatic approach to foreign aid with new objectives on the African continent. The CCP held several conferences both before and after Mao’s death centered on rethinking foreign aid. Between 1967 and 1976, aid, including military aid, averaged around five percent of total government expenditure²⁰. By 1975, China had aid programs in more countries in Africa than the United States did²¹, a trend that continues to this day, and was contributing more funding to the continent than the Soviet Union. The conclusion of these conferences was that current aid levels were unsustainable, at least for China’s economic capacity at the time. However, China could not afford to lose its hard-earned political clout with African nations by cutting aid. Furthermore, many of the development projects that the Chinese had handed over to African governments were now in grave danger of failing, including the

¹⁹ Li

²⁰ Bräutigam 52

²¹ Rotberg 198

TANZARA railway. The CCP decided to follow through with previous aid commitments, but not plan any new prestige projects for the time being. Also, the CCP began to more rigorously assess the profitability of proposed projects before committing aid. Simultaneously, mainland China was opening up to foreign investment and was starting to receive aid from Japan and the West.

In addition, a debate emerged in the global South which criticized the neoliberal policy of structural adjustment imposed on highly indebted countries by Bretton Woods institutions. As a result of the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, commodity prices fell dramatically and import prices rose, causing many African countries to ask the World Bank and IMF for loans. In exchange for these loans, highly indebted countries were forced to engage in structural adjustment programs. The deals that the Chinese have offered the African governments post-1978 “are based on similar deals Japan and the West offered China decades ago, and which the post-Mao Chinese accepted in the belief that they could also win from an approach that was not about aid, but business”²². Since the 1960s, China had been maintaining barter agreements with several African countries to trade raw materials for manufactured goods. During the 1980s, China started to allow aid recipients to pay back loans by exporting local products or natural resources. These resource-credit swaps enabled struggling cash-strapped African countries to avoid going to the Bretton Woods institutions. This modern-day barter system would form a key element of what has been dubbed the Beijing Consensus.

The Chinese learned from the lessons of previous projects and from being a recipient of aid. In the 1980s and 1990s, the CCP actively encouraged state-owned construction companies to bid on contracts and participate in joint ventures. Young Chinese were also The establishment of

²² Bräutigam 308

Eximbank and China Development Bank in 1992 was an important development in the formation of the alternative to Bretton Woods system. The loans that these policy banks give African countries are concessional, and many times have higher interest rates than previous loans but are not prescriptive like the loans given in exchange for implementing structural adjustment programs mandated the Washington Consensus. Foreign aid remained a political tool of the CCP, but also began to reflect rising Chinese mercantile and political ambitions. Furthermore, aid has been used to quell concerns about China's rapid ascent and to present an image of China as a responsible power. The dissatisfaction of the Global South with the Washington Consensus would also provide a window of opportunity for China to present itself to African countries as an alternative source of funding.

Aid to Profits (2000-Present):

In the 2000s, the Chinese began to see returns on their decades-long investment in African countries, both regarding political influence and economic profits. However, Chinese aid in Africa only garnered the attention of the West after the 2006 Beijing Summit of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation. Political leaders from 48 of the 53 African countries, including 40 heads of state²³, attended the summit to discuss new strategic partnerships and deepening economic cooperation. By this point, China was giving aid to every country in Africa except eSwatini, formerly Swaziland, which still to this day continues to recognize Taiwan and has no diplomatic ties to the PRC whatsoever. At the summit, the CCP promised to double its aid to Africa and to expand the content of its aid programs to establish new hospitals, schools, provide more university scholarships, debt relief, and training centers. Of the approximately 5 billion dollars' worth of funding pledged to African countries at the 2006 Beijing Summit, 3bn was

²³ Kahn

comprised of concessional loans which are ODA, while the remaining \$2bn was to be distributed through Eximbank as preferential export buyer's credit which not considered aid²⁴. It is important to note that when the CCP announced commitment to increase aid at the Beijing Summit Chinese officials did not make any distinction between ODA and OFF instead referring to both financial flows as simply aid.

Africa plays a key role in the implementation of the CCP's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was announced in 2014. Originally coined 'One Belt, One Road,' the plan is comprised of the overland Silk Road Economic Belt, which is primarily located in Central Asia, and the Maritime Silk Road, which pretty much spans the globe. According to China's current President, Xi Jinping, "Resources for our cooperation are not to be spent on any vanity projects, but in places where they count the most...inadequate infrastructure is believed to be the biggest bottleneck to Africa's development"²⁵. East Africa has emerged as a hub for infrastructure projects as part of the BRI, particularly ports and railways, as part of the initiative. In 2017, the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway was completed. The railway is the largest investment in Kenya since independence and is the flagship project of the MSRI in the region. The Addis Ababa-Djibouti railway was inaugurated in 2018 also as part of the BRI. The railway is the first electrified single gauge railway in Africa replaces neglected tracks that were 100 years old and connects the landlocked of Ethiopia to the port of Djibouti, which handles over 90% of Ethiopia's international trade²⁶. The twin goals of this audacious soft power initiative are national revitalization and restoring China as a Great Power. The initiative seeks to achieve national revitalization through invigorating the state-owned construction companies. The various

²⁴Bräutigam 173

²⁵ CNBC

²⁶ Global Infrastructure Hub

infrastructure projects undertaken in African countries as part of the BRI serve as an important outlet for “China’s industrial overcapacities, particularly coal, cement, steel, glass, solar, shipbuilding, and aluminum”²⁷. The BRI projects are an attempt to redirect the flow of trade to and from China by creating alternative routes in order to reduce China’s dependence on highly contested maritime chokepoints in the South China and the Sea of Japan. In my opinion, the BRI presents at least as many advantages for China as it is for African countries. As a result of the BRI projects, China and Chinese business is more visible than ever.

Between 2000 and 2014, China and the United States had similar sized official finance portfolios but very different composition in terms of what is officially considered aid. Out of the 394.5 billion dollars of US foreign aid analyzed by AidData, the vast majority of the funding, \$366.4 bn was considered ODA. Only \$81.1bn of China’s official funding was considered ODA out of the total \$354.4 bn given over the 15-year period²⁸. “If we looked at aid alone, we would not be able to accurately gauge the full extent of China’s global development footprint”²⁹. Additionally, seven of the top ten recipients of Chinese ODA were in Africa, demonstrating that “traditional aid” plays a more important role in the continent than in other regions. The aid given to these seven African countries was distributed quite evenly geographically and in terms of funding: Cote d’Ivoire (\$4.0 billion), Ethiopia (\$3.7 billion), Zimbabwe (\$3.6 billion), Cameroon (\$3.4 billion), Nigeria (\$3.1 billion), Tanzania (\$3.0 billion), and Ghana (\$2.5 billion). Angola is the sole outlier among African countries in receiving \$13.4 billion in OFF³⁰. On the contrary, only three African nations are among the top ten recipients of American ODA: Egypt

²⁷ Nantulya

²⁸ AidData

²⁹ Custer

³⁰ AidData

(\$1.46 billion), Ethiopia (\$922 million), and Nigeria (\$793 million)³¹ Not only does the US give less in Africa than China but it also has aid programs in less countries as well illustrating that one country priorities aid to African countries more than the other.

Criticisms of China in Africa:

There have been numerous criticisms of the CCP's aid policy and Chinese businesses operating in Africa by both individuals in Western and African countries. Chinese companies are often criticized for importing their own labor. Even when they do employ locals, many Africans have protested the poor working conditions and lax environmental standards of Chinese firms. There have been multiple cases of Chinese firms not giving local workers the required minimum wage, using child labor, and not paying into social security. Several Chinese companies have been clearly implicated in illegal logging and fishing. Usually instances of unsavory business practices and environmental degradation are blamed on subcontractors and not understanding the local regulations. In the intriguing ethnographic work, *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*, most of the Chinese expats that author Howard French encounters in his travels employ Chinese workers to do any sort of skilled work and paid them more money than the labor would make in China. Meanwhile, the Chinese businessowners would pay the local African labors far less to do menial tasks³². While the Chinese are no more guilty than other foreign companies, newspapers and academic articles have been dominated in recently years by stories of Chinese exploitive practices.

Many African countries have racked up sustainable debts with Chinese banks, causing concerns about predatory loans and investing. As of 2021, "the countries in Africa with the

³¹ USAID

³² French 53, 84,

largest Chinese debt are Angola (\$25bn), Ethiopia (\$13.5bn), Zambia (\$7.4bn), the Republic of Congo (\$7.3bn), and Sudan (6.4bn)³³. These debt levels are definitely unsustainable, but Chinese owned construction companies keep lobbying for more infrastructure projects and for countries to be included as part of the BRI since Chinese policy banks usually distribute the funding directly to the Chinese construction companies if the African country has a bad credit rating. Basically, the Chinese firms don't care whether the project is profitable or if the African government can pay back the debt, either way they get paid. Some have warning that if China is not able to recoup its investments, we will see the seizure of property and industries in African countries.

The most common criticism from the West is that Chinese aid in Africa is promoting bad governance and has exacerbated already rampant corruption. The Chinese have been accused of loans are propping up dictatorships and undermining the West "efforts" to promote democracy in the region. The opaque or secretive nature of the CCP official finance portfolio does little to quell the fears surrounding Chinese aid. The fact is China does not give more aid to authoritarian or corrupt regimes but unlike other traditional lenders the CCP does not withhold funding on the basis of human rights violations or mismanagement of funds. There is actually little chance of embezzlement of Chinese aid because as I previously mentioned is usually allocated to the Chinese company managing the project rather than into the bank account of the government receiving the aid which is the policy of the Bretton Woods institutions. In addition, "Chinese views on corruption are shaped by their experience at home. Corruption is widespread in China...yet it has not derailed economic development. Aside from the impact it might have on business, imposing economic sanctions or conditionality to combat corruption is seen as harmful

³³ Broadman

to Africans because it hurts their opportunities for growth”³⁴. China does not require countries to have good governance partly informed by its own experience combatting corruption and out of respect for the sovereignty of the recipient country.

Conclusion:

China and Africa are equally reliant on each other and have formed a symbiotic relationship. China as the largest developing nation in the world, “ravenously seeks raw materials— petroleum, timber, ferrochrome, cobalt, platinum, copper, diamonds, and so on”³⁵. China alone accounts for 40% of the global copper demand³⁶. China has utilized export credits to acquire necessary resources in addition to building infrastructure to facilitate the extraction and shipment of raw materials. Much has been made about how Chinese aid and development is supposedly only concerned with resources, but this claim ignores several facts. China gives ODA to every country in Africa that recognizes the “One China” policy, and the funding is distributed fairly evenly. Eximbank has given OOF, usually in the form of commercial rate loans for infrastructure with payment guaranteed in oil like Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Equatorial Guinea³⁷, but they only represent a fraction of the OOF and even smaller fraction of the Chinese total official finance commitments. Resources are certainly a consideration in the CCP’s current foreign aid policy, but I would argue that it is not the sole deciding factor.

Instead, Chinese aid can best be described as a pragmatic, well thought-out strategy that is reaping benefits in terms soft power in Africa but international stage as well. China can actually be perceived as buying votes at the UN, harkening back to the quote from Bill Maher,

³⁴ Bräutigam 296

³⁵ Rotberg 1

³⁶ French 42

³⁷ Bräutigam 279

and the utilization of previous aid to gain international recognition for the PRC. “If African countries voted with China in the UN General Assembly an extra 10% of the time, they would get an 86% bump in official development assistance on average”³⁸. This is only one of many demonstrable examples of how Chinese foreign aid and political influence with African governments.

Africa also provides an emerging market for Chinese goods and products. Investment in education, increasing trade intra-African trade, expansion of the service sector of the economy has driven economic growth is slowly reducing the rate of poverty in most countries in Africa. “As result, in the last decade, Africa’s collective middle class, numbering over 300 million people, has grown larger than that of India”³⁹. The expected population growth and development of a larger consumer class in Africa are both essential to China’s continued economic growth, especially in manufacturing and construction sectors.

On the other hand, Africa has replaced East Asia as the region with the fastest rate of urbanization and is desperate need of infrastructure. Both the CCP officials and African leaders have stated they believe that China’s incredible economic growth in recent decades that lifted 800 million people out of poverty since the PRC reformed its economy in 1978⁴⁰ can serve as a model for underdeveloped African countries. An Afrobarometer survey published in 2016 found that most Africans have positive views of China’s growing presence in their countries. On average, 63% of Africans view China’s economic and political influence as somewhat or very positive. In addition, 56% of Africans also see China’s development assistance as doing a somewhat or very good job of meeting their country’s needs. Surprisingly, given the

³⁸ Custer

³⁹ French 43

⁴⁰ World Bank

vilification of Chinese aid and development in Africa, only 15% of the respondents viewed it as somewhat or very negative. According to the same survey, 28% of Africans still see their former colonial power as wielding the greatest external influence in their country, but interestingly 23% of respondents that see China as the most influential external power in comparison with 22% of who responded with the US. However, the US is the most popular model for national development being cited by 30% of respondents but was followed closely by China with 24% of the responses⁴¹. The positive perceptions shown in the survey demonstrate that China's foreign aid policy is translating directly into credibility and soft power in Africa.

Abderrahmane Sissako, one of Africa's most prominent movie directors, said in an interview about his highly acclaimed film *Timbuktu*,

“When Mali was a colony, there was one bridge on the river Niger that goes through Bamako. After independence, the French were supposed to build a second. They never did. In the end, the second bridge was built by Saudi Arabia. The third was built by China. All the sports grounds have been built by the Chinese. The roads are being built by the Chinese. And in the west, they keep telling us, ‘Watch out for the Chinese’... The west thinks China is a danger to Africa because the west was a danger to Africa. But really it's a danger to the west.”⁴²

Sissako also mentioned a Malian proverb: a drowning man grabs hold of the crocodile. I think that this quote accurately describes the nature of Chinese development in Africa. Chinese aid does have its critics, but it is providing long overdue and desperately needed infrastructure in Africa. I think the more important question to examine is why the West so concerned with

⁴¹ Lektorwe, Chingwete, Okuru, & Samson

⁴² Leigh

African countries receiving aid and having options in financing infrastructure. I would argue that the US and Europe are particularly keen on condemning Chinese aid because the traditional powers are worried about losing their hegemony in Africa.

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